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A REBEL AND HER ROGUE

SUSAN VARNO



SOUL MATE PUBLISHING

New York

A REBEL AND HER ROGUE

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Cover Design by Laura Bemis

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Published in the United States of America by
Soul Mate Publishing
P.O. Box 24

Macedon, New York, 14502

ISBN: 978-1-64716-110-1

www.SoulMatePublishing.com

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*For my husband Richard
who made everything possible.*

Acknowledgments

For many years, I've wanted to publish a romance novel. However, life got in the way. In the meantime, I published over a thousand shorter pieces in magazines and newspapers. In my golden years, I've finally finished a book that Soul Mate Senior Editor Debby Gilbert wants to publish. I am proud of *A Rebel and Her Rogue*, but I was amazed, delighted, had heart palpitations and was speechless when I opened her acceptance e-mail. (Which I printed and pasted above my computer).

Coming up with a plot and spending time with characters is only the first step. What kept me writing, editing and submitting was a series of writing clubs. My first group of kindred spirits was The M. U. S. E. (which stood for "Many Umbrellas Smiling Everywhere). We met in Chicago Ridge and later in Oak Forest, Illinois. About the same time, I joined Love Designers, the Romance Writers of America chapter in Calumet City, Illinois. Later still, I joined Northwest Indiana RWA. After my husband

and I moved to Arkansas in 1999, I joined Twin Lakes Writers in Mountain Home. Eighteen years later back in Illinois, I am now a member of the Nameless Writers Group at Fountaindale Library in Bolingbrook and Windy City RWA in Naperville.

A Rebel and Her Rogue would not have been accepted without incredible insights and comments from several RWA contest judges. My writing friend Nancy Bunting and my sister Mary Jensen read my final manuscript for mistakes and inconsistencies. I am grateful to all these people.

Chapter 1

Sherwood Forest

March 1815

Blake urged his horse Valor deeper into the woods. *Just how desperate is Miss Cassiopeia Valient? Only a woman who has abandoned all hope would agree to marry the notorious Blake Forester Lord Rayneford, Colonel of the Horse Guard, Retired. Namely, me.*

Three weeks ago, Mother announced she'd found a wife for him. "Cassie is a strong-willed young lady," she insisted. "I pray she can turn you away from your life of scandal, mayhem, and daring death at every turn."

Over a year ago, he had returned from the War. Thousands of soldiers died in Spain. Blake couldn't fathom why he deserved to live. He'd hoped his destructive behavior might have settle that question.

However this morning, he'd promised Mother he would trot down the River Road to greet his "intended" and accompany her back

to his Green Garden Estate. Something, cowardice probably, made him veer off the road onto a secluded path among the oak trees of this ancient forest.

The Sheriff of Nottinghamshire is my friend. If I get him drunk, he may agree to arrest me. Spending a week in gaol is kinder than inflicting my miserable self on this pathetic woman.

Through the trees, he heard the wild rumbling of carriage wheels. Wood splintering. A horse shrieking. A man shouting.

Giving Valor his head, Blake raced through an opening in the trees. He burst onto the road and pulled sharply to a halt. Half in the ditch, a small carriage canted against a tree. The vehicle teetered. One wheel turned slowly in the air. While the coachman struggled to release the harness, the wild-eyed horse pawed the ground ready to bolt.

Blake leapt down from Valor. The carriage door flew open. A head of lush black hair appeared followed by the most enchanting face he'd ever beheld. Dark brows, dark lashes. As he surveyed her freckled nose and cheeks, his gaze came upon the damsel's plump red lips. They arched in a vicious frown.

He slid his hand around her waist and lifted her into his arms. She was lithe but endowed with graceful curves. She laced her arm around his shoulder. Her body pressed against his made sweat prickle in his most intimate places.

“Cassiopeia Valient?” he asked.

“Mister Durgan,” she snapped. “Is this any way to conduct a kidnapping?”

Durgan? The name pulled him up smartly. Did his potential bride-to-be mistake him for Dangerous Dan Durgan, the Gentleman Bandit? Beneath his leather jacket, Blake’s shirt collar stood open. His breeches were tucked into rough boots, and he wore his light blond hair tied back with a buckskin thong. Those details might explain her confusion.

What confusion? She expected him to kidnap her! Ransom must be her motive.

As soon as her feet touched the road, the woman wrestled free of his grasp. For someone who had just been thrown against a tree, she seemed unruffled. She was tall, statuesque really. Much of her rich black tresses had escaped their hairpins. As if savoring the freedom, the woman stroked her gloved fingers through her hair, sprinkling hairpins on the ground.

A small trembling began in his stomach and crept toward his heart. What a magnificent specimen. Her freckles meant she enjoyed being out of doors. Her Shako style hat hung against her shoulder. With a swat of her hand, she yanked the small-billed cap loose. Like skipping a stone, she sailed it through a gap in the trees. His tremble became a tender tingle.

Glancing north and south on the rutted gravel road, Blake listened for the approach of the real Gentleman Bandit. He heard nothing but the wind rustling through the trees. Then he noticed the carriage driver, a thickset man with the spread leg stance of a prizefighter.

The fellow aimed a pistol at him.

Blake could hardly wait for whatever happened next. He craved a real adventure to shake him out of his self-destructive behavior. He wanted to wipe away the misery he'd brought on himself and save his mother from further worry. What better distraction than this diabolical damsel and her armed henchman?

First, he must convince Miss Valient he was indeed her outlaw kidnapper. Blake gazed into the woman's eyes, the only part of her he didn't consider dangerous. "Is your man's

weapon really necessary? You need my help to carry out your ransom scheme, do you not?"

"Where is your green eye mask?" she demanded. "And your eccentric hat? These are how I was to identify you."

He had heard Dangerous Dan wore a mask over his eyes and a cap to hide his hair. "That is my disguise when I commit highway robbery. If you and I wander about doing whatever you plan to do, I will be arrested simply for covering my face."

Her frown deepened. Had this woman no muscles to create a smile?

"Very well," she said. "Understand this. My man Samuel is a crack shot. He will keep you in his sight at all times. He is to protect me and testify that you have done nothing to besmirch my reputation."

Planning to have herself kidnapped would besmirch any woman's reputation. Unless, of course, she got away with it.

"Where to next?" Blake asked.

"We must hasten to your hideout. I arranged this plan through your accomplice. Did he not explain the details? He said you were close kin."

"Yes. Yes, he is." *Uncle, brother, nephew, cousin perhaps?*

Before the real kidnapper arrived, Blake needed to get her off the road and deep into the forest. "Are you injured? Dizzy, sore?"

"I am not."

"Blurry vision? Headache?"

With an irritated sigh, Miss Valient glanced around. "We must be away at once. You brought only one horse? Samuel is adept at riding bareback. Our horse seems calm enough to carry him." She narrowed her eyes. "What will you ride, Mr. Durgan?"

This woman dared suggest the man she believed was an outlaw should give her his horse?

"What I always ride." He cocked his head toward Valor. "You are welcome to join me. Pommel or rump?"

She squared her shoulders. "I think not."

"Then, madam, you shall walk."

Miss Valient straightened to her full height. She reached nearly to his nose, quite a feat considering he towered over most men. She didn't blink.

"Very well." Her teeth parted only enough to bite out the words. "I shall ride in front."

Her driver retrieved her valise from the carriage. From her case, she pulled out a crimson ribbon. His mouth fell ajar as he

watched her lift her arms to tie it around her loose hair.

Hair secure, she said, "Samuel, I will call out if I need you to shoot this man. He is not as civilized as we were led to believe."

With his hands on her waist, Blake lifted her into the saddle. He admired her backside, a fetching display of curves that rivaled her front side. As he hoisted himself to sit behind her, she arranged herself sideways. He heard hoofbeats on the road. With one arm, he hugged her against his chest. Then he spurred Valor across the roadside ditch and into the forest. Samuel seemed a skilled rider because he quickly followed.

So as not to attract attention, Blake slowed his horse. Small animals scampered out of their path. Birds complained of the invasion. Crows scolded. A jay whistled.

Before he could ask a question, and he was unsure how to allay her suspicions, Miss Valient said, "Tomorrow in Manchester we will post the ransom note. I have the outline of my demands committed to memory. Six hundred pounds from Lord Rayneford."

Did he mishear? Was there a second Lord Rayneford?

He had heard correctly. Miss Valient

expected him to pay six hundred pounds to ransom her. He should be shocked. Horrified. Livid. Outraged! At least offended.

Why am I not? Because this woman fascinates me. Foiling her plot, making her cringe and cry and beg me not to have her arrested. What a glorious ending. I will stretch this charade out as long as I can.

“What makes you think Lord Rayneford will pay?” he asked.

She leaned forward. “That is none of your concern.”

“If I am to risk a noose about my neck, you will answer my question.”

He played his part rather well. When he discovered all of her game, he would tell Mother she had thrown a mercenary femme fatale in his path.

“He will pay because I am his intended,” the larcenous lady said. “Lord Rayneford must ransom his bride-to-be.”

If Miss Valient had been kidnapped, Mother would insist he pay the ransom. Though sketchy, the betrothal negotiations might have legal standing.

Forgetting to act like an outlaw, Blake exploded. “Your father arranged to have you kidnapped by the most infamous bandit in

England?"

She returned his angry outburst with equal fire. "He did nothing of the kind! I regret I must expose my father to this ordeal, but I can find no other way."

She hatched this plan by herself? Crafty woman, and almost as reckless as I am.

Reins in his right hand, he wound his arms loosely around her waist. To gauge her reaction, he pulled her closer. "Are you not afraid I will ravish you? Or worse?"

"I am hardly that foolish," she said. "Mr. Durgan, I have researched your history. You have always treated women with respect."

Samuel rode close enough to hear their conversation. "Missy, give this 'ere bandit the emptyings from your purse, and let us be gone. This were a poor plan from the start. Give over now, and we'll try to make you pleasin' to His Lordship."

For an instant, all passion seemed to escape her. She slumped against Blake's chest. He searched for words of encouragement. He needed to know the rest of her scheme.

She spoke so soft only he could hear. "Lord Rayneford is a scoundrel and wastrel. His mother fears no woman will ever agree to marry him."

For a mile or two, Cassie remained silent. Every time the outlaw used the reins, he brushed her waist with his arm. His frequent contact launched sensual quivers below her waist with forays toward her knees.

She shuddered. *My plan is madness, though if I were a man, I'd be praised for my daring. Father always encouraged me to take charge of my destiny.*

She remembered her heartbreaking conversation with her father three weeks ago. As often happened in the spring, the River Trent had overflowed its banks. This year, water overtopped the embankments built to protect their River's Leap Estate. Unless repairs began soon, the tenant farmers couldn't plant crops. Marriage to Lord Rayneford included a promise he would lend her family the funds to rebuild. She argued with her father. Threats and pleas flew through the air as well as odd bits of the second best crockery. She tried to convince Papa that the loathsome lord would never marry her. Cassie was too proficient at manly things and totally inept at anything feminine. She couldn't force herself to fawn or simper or be obsequious. She needed a good reason

before she smiled and a better one to keep her opinions to herself. Her wild behavior was often out of control. What man in his right mind would want to marry her?

She stifled a laugh.

“What amuses you, madam?” the outlaw asked.

Best to make conversation. Better than thinking about his arm brushing my bodice.
“Riding with you in this fashion is improper.”

“Tis true. Why do you find this humorous?”

“I plan to steal six hundred pounds from Lord Rayneford. Yet my chief concern is that someone might see us riding together.”

He laughed. “On my honor as a gentleman bandit, I will never mention this ride to anyone.”

When he chose, the man could be charming. He was younger than she expected, no more than in his early thirties. His features had a rough appeal. His face looked like an artist had begun to sculpt an Adonis but was interrupted before he smoothed the marble. Mr. Durgan’s forehead was too high, his cheeks too gaunt, his lips too full and sensuous. But the man’s pale blue eyes sparked with flashes of hellfire and promises of

heavenly delight.

She shook the foolish thoughts from her head. “Mr. Durgan, I must apologize, but I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Ah. You are not acquainted with proper kidnapping etiquette?”

“Sadly, no. Why did you scare our carriage horse into bolting?”

He squirmed in his seat. “Why? What?”

“You charged down the road nearly colliding with us. Our horse panicked. Instead of stopping to help, you dashed around the next bend.”

From inside the carriage, she hadn’t seen the rider clearly. In a flash of memory, that man’s horse seemed smaller than the steed beneath her.

“Umm, well,” the outlaw stammered. “What with the noise of the crash, all that breakage, the horse howling, I feared someone else might hasten to your rescue. Review your scheme with me. After I take you to my hideout and you send the ransom note, then what?”

Just like Robin Hood centuries ago, Dangerous Dan’s hideout must be in Sherwood Forest. Under other circumstances, how romantic this would be.

The outlaw carried her into the deepest part of the forest. Cassie had a keen sense of direction, but at the moment, she was completely misplaced. Here the towering trees blocked much of the sunlight. As they rode, ground birds fluttered up into the trees. Oak leaves crunched beneath the horses' hooves. Careful not to encounter anything overly masculine, she leaned her head against his shoulder. She sensed his stomach muscles tense.

Cassie said, "When he receives your letter, Lord Rayneford will need time to gather the funds. We wait ten days. Then you send another missive naming the rendezvous location."

"Where am I to meet him?" the outlaw asked.

She had several places in mind but hadn't chosen the final one. "You will know when I lead you to the spot."

She'd been excited to outwit this nobleman who deserved to be robbed. Thinking now of how her father and two sisters would suffer when they learned she'd been kidnapped, Cassie was ashamed. *How dare I put the people I love through such worry and heartbreak? As I often do, I reveled in danger, ignoring the*

consequences of my actions.

The outlaw interrupted. "Remind me of how much I earn for my trouble."

"One twelfth of the ransom money," she replied.

"I earn a mere fifty pounds for risking my life?"

Her heart rose in her throat. What if she was wrong about this man? What if he intended to kill her and Samuel so he could keep the entire ransom?

Cassie stifled a gulp. "That, sir, is what you agreed to."

"How much do you know about this Lord Rayneford?"

"Only what his mother told me." That lady was the cause of Cassie's predicament. "Grace Forester is an exemplary woman. How she raised such a wayward son is a profound puzzle."

The outlaw squirmed or stiffened or did both. "How would your mother feel if she knew the mischief you've gotten into?"

"She would look down from heaven and wring her hands."

Cassie pictured her mother's sweet face. Her death nine years ago nearly destroyed their family. For weeks, Papa stared out his

bedroom window. He barely ate or slept. He neglected the manor house and the tenant farms. Cassie coaxed, begged, and pleaded until he put aside his grief. Since then, she'd helped her father run the estate and care for her younger sisters.

The outlaw's voice brought her back to the present. "His mother told you he was wayward? She used that word? Is he worse than myself?"

Why does this man champion Lord Rayneford? Is he searching for proof our victim will pay my ransom? "You steal and occasionally kidnap. The lord has too many faults to reckon."

A month ago, Lady Rayneford visited the Valients at River's Leap Manor. One night after supper, she invited Cassie to sit with her in the parlor. The woman laid out her son's shortcomings. Grace agonized about his headlong dash into dangerous behavior, his dark moods, and bouts of despair. Days later, her father and his mother cobbled up this ridiculous marriage plan.

Cassie chose one of Lady Rayneford's milder accusations. "He cheats at cards."

The outlaw argued, "Sometimes those who lose at the gaming table call their opponent a

cheat rather than admit they lack card sense.”

“I suppose the men he shoots in duels lie about being dead? Dueling is barbaric as well as illegal. The sport is nothing but blood lust.” Realizing she may have overstepped, she asked, “You’ve never killed anyone, have you?”

“There are some questions a lady does not ask a gentleman,” he said. “That is one of them.”

Why must she convince this man that the reprobate nobleman deserved to be fleeced? “He ravishes women.”

“I trust all these women were taken against their will?”

Given the circumstances, she supposed her “captor” had the right to make some inquiries. “Even if the lady is willing, a man is duty bound to protect her virtue. A true gentleman would resist temptation.”

“Your virtue is intact, I assume,” the man drawled. “Is that because no man has ever tried to seduce you?”

Her cheeks warmed. “Sir, there are questions a gentleman does not ask a lady. That is one of them.”

His light chuckle goaded Cassie to delve further into Lord Rayneford’s misdeeds.

“According to his mother, he was dismissed from the army because . . .”

His arm muscles tensed around her. When she dared look at him, he was grinding his teeth.

Cassie knew she should stop talking, but as usual she didn't. “After several years of service in our war against France, he returned without a scratch. His mother said other soldiers criticized him for avoiding injury. The Duke of Wellington ordered him home, saying the lord could only return if his attitude improved. Instead, Lord Rayneford has plunged into debauchery and scandal.”

Her host pulled his horse to a halt. With his palm, he shoved up her chin until she had to look at him. Through barely parted teeth, he growled, “Exactly how many battles have you fought in?”

She pried his fingers loose. “If I were allowed to fight, I would welcome the chance to serve King and Country.”

The fury in his squinting eyes made her recoil. She thought he might put his hands around her throat and squeeze the breath out of her.

“I'm sorry,” she said, realizing the stupidity of her words. “I am truly sorry.”

The outlaw spurred his horse to a trot. Ducking to avoid low tree branches, Cassie clutched his arm.

Had this man been in the War? Did the horrors of battle turn him into an outlaw?

Silently, she promised to keep quiet until they reached his hideout. Then she would be polite and thank him for helping her. Too often, she thought like a man. A true woman would be sympathetic to any man's experience of war. Cassie had been insulting.

Chapter 2

Buffalo and Kangaroos

After an hour or more of gloomy silence, they reached the edge of the primeval forest. Along the way, Cassie spotted a few curious deer, but the horse's frantic pace warned away most of the wildlife. The outlaw slowed his horse to a walk. She no longer had to seize his arm to keep from falling off.

He stopped before a woodcutter's thatched roofed cottage. Stacks of cut logs lined the fence. The sweet smell of sawdust hung in the air. As he swung his leg over the horse's rump, the man leaned against her. His breath breezed over her neck, shooting warm streaks through her body.

His feet on the ground, he offered her a hand. "Wait here with your man. I must make arrangements inside."

The outlaw strode across the yard as if he owned the place. Minutes later, he emerged from the cottage with an older man and woman in tow. If they were his confederates,

no wonder he wanted a greater share of the ransom money.

He hurried ahead of the couple. "Say only what is necessary to these people."

Keeping her head bowed, Cassie feigned the nervous quake of a kidnap victim. If there weren't so much at stake, she'd delight in this escapade.

Her accomplice boosted the woodcutter onto a horse and spanked the animal's rump.

"Where are you sending him?" she asked.

He turned her and Samuel toward the house. "He will procure a horse for you, my sweet."

She hurried to keep up. "Where will he find one?"

Her "captor" glanced over his shoulder. "That is another question you should not ask a gentleman, especially if the gentleman is a thief."

Now she was a party to horse stealing. *What a marvelous life this man led, free of rules and restraints unless he happens to get caught. Ah, but the joy of freedom could be worth the threat of prison or the noose. This man might appreciate my wild nature. We could ransack the countryside together. Permanently take up thievery? What am I thinking? Now even my*

imagination is out of control.

The late afternoon sun twinkled through the treetops. Inside the cottage, a welcoming fire lit the whitewashed walls. The mistress curtsied to the outlaw. The woman made such a fuss over him you'd think he was Lord of the Manor. Perhaps he shared Robin Hood's better qualities, and this woman was repaying his generosity.

With a gentle smile, the man did have a toothsome grin, he shooed the woman away with instructions to bring supper. She winked as she retreated to the hearth.

Cassie followed him to the rough plank table. Mr. Durgan, should she think of him as Dan?, slid beside her on the bench. The table was set for supper. She mixed honey into her tea. The outlaw's leg came perilously close to hers. If she moved an inch, her knee would touch his thigh.

With two oatcakes and a cup of tea in him, her "kidnapper" said, "There is more I need to know."

She straightened. *I must make him understand I am in charge of this operation. He is merely my agent.* "You know all that concerns you."

He thrust his face close to hers. A thrill

shot through her. Instead of pulling back, Cassie fought the urge to move closer still. Close enough for a kiss. Was the peril of her scheme making her amorous?

“Madam,” he said, “you will answer me, or I will dump you by the side of the road to fend for yourself.”

Samuel sat across from them. His face puckered plaintively. “Little Miss, we should let this ‘ere bandit do just that. We can tell ‘em at the big house the carriage upturned and you’ve been wanderin’ around dazed. Right after, you should be makin’ yourself attractive to the young lord. He can’t be as bad as you’ve heard.”

Dan muttered under his breath, “What man could be?”

Mercifully at that moment, the woodcutter’s wife brought platters of food; one with bacon and fried potatoes, the other with cooked carrots and greens. On her next trip, the woman laid out plates, forks and knives as well as fresh bread, butter, cheese, and gravy.

Cassie hoped her criminal companion would concentrate on his food, but after filling his mouth several times, his torrent of questions resumed.

“If Rayneford pays your ransom, won’t you be beholden to him? To get return on the money, he can force you to marry him.”

“Not likely,” she said. “Men don’t care much for me.”

The outlaw’s gaze traveled from her head to her waist. No doubt, he imagined her entire body, probably with her clothes in a heap beside her.

“You miss my meaning,” she said. “I speak up. I argue. I disobey my elders. In fact, I disobey everyone. That makes me unattractive as a wife for any man.”

With a forkful of potatoes near his lips, he said, “You need a strong man to break you to bridle. Have you never met a man brave enough to accept the challenge?”

At River’s Leap, Cassie hadn’t met many gentlemen. The male gentry avoided her, both those who knew her and those who had heard about her. “I wouldn’t want that sort of husband.”

She admitted to being headstrong and willful. Even though her behavior often led her into trouble, she loved the thrill of danger. For this and other reasons, she expected the debauched lord to reject her. Just like Mr. Durgan, he would only tolerate a woman he

could control. Cassie could barely control her own behavior, let alone have someone else govern her. Which was why she needed the ransom money.

“I don’t want to return to my father saying I displeased Lord Rayneford and he rejected our match. To do so would mean we lose our home and are forced to rely on the charity of our relatives.”

“This man might be more amenable than you think,” he said. “He has need of a wife. He is so disreputable no decent woman will have him.”

“If he is foolish enough to marry me, I’m sure he intends to continue his life unchanged. I would be strictly for breeding.”

Indignation churned in her breast. If she didn’t stop talking, ugly words would gush from her mouth. She dropped her fork, swung her legs over the bench, and stalked out the door. Her temper was her most unpleasant trait. And her least controlled. She wanted this desperado to invoke no more of her choler. Unfortunately, he followed two steps behind.

The man had a disconcerting habit of standing too close. Whether from her rising anger or from his appeal, she refused to step back.

“Forgive me,” he said.

Cassie forced herself to stare into the tidy garden instead of into his steel blue eyes. “Then why do you keep prying?”

He spoke softly. “You are extraordinary.”

Oh yes, this man had beguiled many a woman. His rugged looks, his demanding ways, this unexpected compassion would destroy any female’s resistance.

Affecting an air of nonchalance, the outlaw leaned against a porch post. “I envy Lord Rayneford. He will have the opportunity to experience your fire and anger, your devilment and desire.”

All those qualities flooded her brain. She didn’t see red but her eyes grew blurry. This man could drag any emotion from her, and he seemed determined to inspect the gamut.

He swallowed a grin. “If Lord Rayneford were a wiser man, he would have ridden down to meet you.”

His generous sentiment stunned her. He aimed for her spleen one minute and her heart the next. “Are your kind words meant to make me feel better?”

“I am a thief, not a liar.”

Why did she itch to engage him in the fight of her life? She’d be tempted to take the

challenge, except for the one thing she couldn't control. She longed for his touch, his kiss, maybe more. Overcoming her desire might be a battle she couldn't win.

Cassie shook herself. *What in the world am I thinking? He is an outlaw, and I am supposed to be a gentlewoman.* "Sir, I wish we had met under different circumstances."

He rolled his shoulders as if to relieve some stiffness. "If you only knew. We might have ended badly, but what a glorious adventure we would have."

~ ~ ~

Just before sundown, Blake welcomed Old Martin the woodcutter. The man had returned with the gentlest horse from the Green Garden stable. As Blake helped Miss Valient into the sidesaddle, she curled her arms around his shoulders. At her intimate touch, every part of him shuddered. This woman might be easy to seduce. As the Gentleman Bandit, he could win her. Regardless of how she tried to disguise her passion, Cassie's half-closed eyes, her parted lips, her lungs taking in more air than necessary all disclosed her yearning for forbidden pleasures.

With all of them mounted, Blake picked

out an overgrown trail and headed north. He missed her shoulder pressed against his chest. Even the burning in his loins held little enjoyment. *When she learns who I am, seduction will be out of the question. Defending myself from her blows is more likely.*

Without hurting this lady, he must extricate himself from this deception. He should have introduced himself when she emerged from the carriage, but she had near taken his breath away. When they reached the cottage, he should have told her the truth, but he needed to pry more answers from her. On the porch when she regretted not meeting him under better circumstances, that had been his time to speak. But she had been admiring him. He couldn't spoil that moment.

What ails me? I've never been a coward with women. But this is no simple maiden. Cassiopeia Valient is a force beyond reckoning.

They were fast approaching the edge of the forest. The hay fields of Green Garden lay just beyond. The setting sun painted pink streaks across the western sky.

Blake turned toward a gurgling creek. He needed both feet on firm ground when he told Miss Valient who he really was. She might swing at him, and he needed room to duck.

Eyes half closed, Samuel nodded as if he was falling asleep.

Aching to touch her one last time, Blake helped her down from her saddle. She slid willingly into his arms. He held her too long, enjoying her bosom pressed against his. Swallowing a sigh, he released her and led Valor to the creek's edge. Honesty had always been his hallmark. No mincing words. No spared feelings. Get the pain over with quickly.

When she joined him beside the racing water, he said, "Miss Valient, I must tell you something. This can wait no longer."

"I wonder if our thoughts are similar," she said.

Similar? They couldn't be. However, he had no desire to speak first.

She pulled off her gloves and wiped a hand across her brow. "Earlier, I spoke about courageous behavior."

He bristled. "We will not discuss the war again."

She tucked her gloves into her coat pocket. Right next to the pistol handle. "If I expect men to make sacrifices for their country, I should do no less for my family. Before, I considered you just another outlaw. Now that

I know you, I cannot let you risk your life for me.”

“I’m used to risking my life,” Blake insisted. “I’m a highwayman.” What was she about now? This woman was one puzzle after another.

“Kidnapping for ransom is a hanging offense,” she said.

“This is hardly my first criminal endeavor,” he argued.

“I’m not responsible for your earlier crimes. For this one, I would be. Lord Rayneford is a vicious man. He will hunt you down. When he discovers you don’t have all of his money, he will kill you. I can’t allow this to continue.”

A sliver of joy pierced his despair. Had she guessed he was really the “evil Lord”, but she liked him anyway?

In case he was wrong, he asked, “So the kidnapping is off?”

Her eyes drooped in sorrow. “Samuel’s story of the horse being frightened and us wandering lost will suffice. By now, someone must have found our broken carriage. Lady Rayneford has probably sent people to search for us. If you leave us by the roadside, we’ll be found soon enough. And you will have time to

escape.”

At least she cared for him as the Gentleman Bandit. Might that soften her reaction when she learned he wasn't her favorite outlaw?

“Cassie . . .” He used her first name because his next words required intimacy. “Listen to me. I have to tell you the truth.”

She put her fingertips to his lips, scattering whatever he meant to say.

“I have all the truth I need,” she murmured. Fading sunlight turned her dark hair luminous. “If we had met at some other time. No, not even then. We have too much fire and fight between us. But entertaining the possibilities has been delightful.”

More than delightful. Irresistible. “We can still explore those possibilities.”

She had opened her heart to him. He wanted to cradle her in his arms and stroke her hair. *When I reveal the truth and then forgive her attempt to rob me, Cassie will cry and hug me in gratitude.*

She shook her head. “I must force myself to be what the lord wants. I have responsibilities to my family. If I didn't, I would run away with you this minute.”

His mouth fell open. “You would?”

“I would encourage you to give up your life of crime or at least relocate to a place where larceny is more tolerated. America perhaps or Australia.” She closed her eyes. “What am I thinking? You can live free. I never will.”

She wants to run off with a highwayman she’s known for a few hours? Blake shook his head. Cassiopeia Valient walked a fine line between magnificence and madness.

“You’d give up all you have to be with an outlaw?”

She smiled. He’d been waiting for her smile. Her lips curved, her eyes sparkled, her cheeks bunched. And his insides trembled. If he really were an outlaw, he would carry her to the end of the earth, hunt buffalo or kangaroos and live in a cave just to be with her.

She spoke again. “All those women I thought Lord Rayneford ravished. I know the woman can be as guilty as the man.”

Her standing closer than proper, I know what she wants. Cassie turned her face up to his. He had to kiss her. How could he insult her brave offer by doing anything less?

He barely brushed his lips across hers, but every sinew of his body enjoyed her soft

mouth. Her hands clutched his jacket. Blake couldn't have pulled away if he had caught on fire. She opened her mouth to welcome his tongue. He got lost for a while, too lost to find his way, too drugged with passion to seek a way out. Here they were on the border of the forest, the edge between civilization and wilderness. Cassiopeia Valient was the most desirable and the most willing woman he'd ever met.

"Oh, Cassie," he breathed against her lips. "Deliver me from temptation."

She raised her head and gave him the chance to be a gentleman again. Except her eyes, softer than mink, richer than mahogany, wouldn't let him go.

He wrenched his gaze away and forced his hands to follow.

She said, "I will always hold you in my heart."

He made himself look at her. "I am not . . ."

How could he destroy the rapture beaming from her face? This lady knew what she wanted. She had courage and energy, intelligence and nobility. Plus some charming insanity. If only . . .

He led Valor away from the water. Blake

wanted to leave Cassie and ride as far as his horse would take him. But he couldn't abandon her.

He helped her mount. Pointing to Samuel, Blake said, "Wake him."

She looked near tears. "I'll tell him our plans have changed."

Silently, he promised he would tell her the truth when they reached the back gate into Green Garden.

Sounds of hooves pounded across the grassy field.

A woman on horseback appeared. His mother.

Chapter 3

A Trained Monkey

In horror, Cassie watched as the woman drew closer. Why wasn't Dan spurring his horse into the forest?

"Flee," she cried. "Lady Rayneford is approaching. I will forestall her."

The lady called, "Blake? Is Miss Valient with you?"

Cassie thought to give his horse a swat. "The lady mistakes you for her son." Was the woman's eyesight that bad?

His jaw clenched. "She is not mistaken. I am Blake Forrester Lord Rayneford."

If she were the type to faint, Cassie would have fallen out of her sidesaddle. If one were handy, she would gladly fall on her sword. Instead, she sat mute and unmoving. Now, a great deal of what happened between her and the "outlaw" made sense. He'd asked questions about things he should have known and shown interest in topics that didn't concern him.

Where were the emotions that should animate her? Anger at his deception, panic at how his lordship would deal with her crime, fear for her family's future. Cassie searched for the passion that usually drove her actions. Such passion was a luxury she could no longer afford. Until she figured a way out, her future was in the hands of the devious and dishonest Lord Rayneford.

Blake turned to her. "Say nothing. No one needs to know of your kidnapping plan."

She narrowed her eyes. "Nor of your deception, milord?"

"Get hold of your hostility. I have no reputation to save. I assume you still care for yours."

Moments later, Lady Rayneford pulled her horse beside Cassie. "My dear girl, we were so worried."

Despite Blake's deceit, Cassie's heart gladdened to see his mother. "I am so sorry to cause you alarm."

"When Blake sent word your carriage had crashed, I didn't know what to think. Praise God, you are safe."

Cassie pulled herself up straight. For the sake of her home and family, she would act the part Blake assigned her. "Ever since your

son rescued us, we have been in safe hands.”

As the four of them rode across the white fenced pasture, Blake controlled the conversation. He invented answers to satisfy his mother’s questions. Cassie caught snatches of “disheveled” and “distraught” and “tearful”. None of those adjectives described her behavior. Lies rolled off his tongue with practiced ease. His mother believed every word.

Instead of listening to his tales, Cassie studied Green Garden Manor house. The house was twice the size of River’s Leap Manor. Compactly designed to be warm in winter, long windows welcomed pleasant breezes the rest of the year. Vines climbed the brick walls. Most of the second floor rooms had balconies.

Once inside the house, Cassie declined food and drink.

Lady Rayneford led her up the wide oak staircase. “Cassie, I know you’ve been through a great ordeal, but I can’t hold my curiosity any longer. What was Blake’s behavior toward you? Ever since he returned from Spain, well, he can be quite out of hand.”

“He was a perfect gentleman.” *Except for deceiving me and baiting me and accepting my kiss. Exactly what every mother hopes for.*

Her face lit up. "Thank goodness."

On the second floor, the lady opened a door into a spacious bedroom. On the far wall, French doors faced southwest. "I chose this room because I know you love the out of doors."

"Thank you." In spite of her son, Cassie cared for this woman. She hugged her.

Grace returned the hug. "You'll quickly recover from today's upsetting events. In fact, your adventure may become exciting, even romantic dinner conversation. Despite your reticence and Blake's, I believe something is stirring between you two."

Cassie dropped her arms. "Lady Rayneford, nothing is stirring."

"Be patient. Blake can be abrupt and overly honest, but he's a good man at heart."

Now was not the time to discuss Blake Forester's honesty, but holding her tongue always made Cassie's mouth hurt. "Your son needs a woman who will put up with his willful, arrogant, pushy . . ." She caught herself. "I'm sorry. I am overly honest myself."

"Don't apologize. He's all those things and worse," his mother said. "He needs the right woman to knock those attitudes out of him."

A round of fisticuffs ending with a broken

jaw wouldn't knock anything out of Blake Forrester. "Even if such were possible, I am not the woman for the task. Frankly, I am just as willful as he is."

This is not Blake's fault. Even if the real Dan Durgan kidnapped me, my scheme would have gone badly.

The lady's eyes widened in surprise. "You have never behaved so with me."

"I fear Lord Rayneford will bring out my worst qualities. We will be endlessly at sword points, one skirmish after another." She had accused him of cowardice in battle. He should never forgive her vicious words. "Speak to him. He will say he and I should part company as soon as my carriage is repaired."

His mother gave Cassie another hug. "Don't give up on him. He's been through so much. His father. The war. I can't make you love each other, but you must give him a chance."

Cassie savored the memory of his kiss. "I appreciate your kindness. I don't dislike your son. But we are too much alike. Fire and fire. We would burn each other up."

A look of sorrow crossed the lady's kind face. "I'll send the maid up with the rest of your valises. We retrieved them when we

found your carriage.”

After Lady Rayneford closed the door, Cassie ran to open the French doors. The sun’s afterglow shot purple streaks across the darkening sky. The west wind comforted her. If the breeze could only blow the misery from her heart.

When I return home, I will tell Father what I tried to do. He won’t be angry. Instead, for the hundredth time, he will say, if only your mother had lived to raise you.

All of today’s disasters were her fault. Her whole life had been one adventure after another. She’d broken into places she wasn’t allowed. She’d ridden wild horses, climbed hills and trees, explored caves and ruins, and leapt over the narrow waterfall that gave River’s Leap its name. Plus too many more to recount them all. She excused her wild ways with *if a man can do this, why shouldn’t I?* Her family always worried about her. Often her mischief embarrassed them.

Cassie breathed in the cool night air. Her “outlaw”, Blake Forester, was somewhere in the house. As Samuel advised, she must make herself attractive to him.

Organizing my own kidnapping with a notorious bandit will be my last escapade. This

criminal enterprise was a leap too far. Starting now, I must act like a proper young lady. I will be thoughtful, considerate, even demure. To save myself and my family, I must become a different woman.

~ ~ ~

At ten the next morning, Cassie waited in the library to speak with Blake. Since his mother expected them to marry, Cassie must use his Christian name. An hour ago, she asked the butler to find his master. Did Blake think his delay would throw her into a terrified tizzy? She would “tizzy” for no man. However, her limbs were stiff and a little sore from yesterday’s carriage accident. Stretches and a brisk walk should work out the pain.

Well suited to her mood, shades of brown dominated the cozy room. Books shared space with military mementos; a ship’s clock, a miniature anchor, and model frigates. Inscriptions on the loving cups commemorated famous naval battles. These items belonged to his deceased father. Nothing of the son’s exploits adorned the shelves. Yet Blake had given at least ten years cavalry service to England.

The door flew open. Blake kicked it shut

behind him. "I apologize for my behavior yesterday."

"I understand." She twisted her fingers together. "You needed to know what I was up to."

Cassie couldn't bear to look at him. He was the most striking man she'd ever seen. Power defined his every move.

"I let the masquerade go on too long. I enjoyed playing the highwayman." He fluttered his hands as if flourishing a cape.

She stared at her tightly clasped fingers. "You were most convincing. Last night, I told your mother I want to return home as soon as possible. Samuel is seeing to the carriage repairs. I must ask . . ."

His eyes flared. "You can't leave. You came to see if we suit each other."

He strode toward her. The long window at her back cut off retreat. Yesterday, his nearness excited her. Today, he was crowding her.

Cassie looked into his intense blue eyes. "Sir, I intended to rob you of six hundred pounds."

He grinned. "That was your original plan. When we stopped at the edge of the woods, you decided to make yourself presentable to

the despicable lord.” His grin widened to let his teeth sparkle. “Remember? Just before you kissed me.”

What was this infernal man up to? “Please, never mention our encounter to anyone.”

He leaned his face so close she could smell wintergreen on his breath. “You like me. When you believed I was Dangerous Dan, you wanted us to run off to Australia where we would bamboozle the colonials.”

This man enjoyed making sport of her. Unlike yesterday, she would not let his needle pricks unhinge her.

“You missed my meaning. I long for the freedom of a highwayman. Those were fanciful thoughts. I knew they were impossible. Not to mention, at the time I believed you were an outlaw. A far more respectable occupation than full-time rogue.” Too late to bite back her words, she had promised to be civil.

He blew out his breath. “I am going about this all wrong. Let me try anew. I would consider marrying you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Really?”

“You did not mishear me.”

A frisson of panic streaked through her. “Why would you want to marry me?”

Blake took a step back. Slowly, he eyed her body, down and back up with pauses at her hips and bosom. She felt like a heifer at a Market Day auction.

Cassie clenched her teeth. "I mean in addition to my breeding potential. No, don't answer. I know the reason. You want to please your mother."

Blake pursed his lips so firm they turned nearly white. "I respect and admire my mother. She has cared for me and protected me and defended me when no one else would. But I would not marry some woman just to please Mother, and she would not ask me to."

The force of his words startled her. "Then why for God's sake would you want me? I tried to rob you. I called you names. I listed your faults along with my total aversion to you. I threatened to have Samuel shoot you."

Inside her head, she yelled, *Stop talking and start smiling. He said he might marry you.* However, she was Cassiopeia Valient, incapable of holding her tongue. Why couldn't she force herself to be meek, charming and gracious? The last two, she could do. Being "meek" tripped her up.

"Why do you care what my reasons are?" he said. "Consider your situation, a most

unhappy one and partly of your own making. Marriage to me solves your problems. Your father will accept my offer of a loan, and you will get what every young woman wants, a nobleman for a husband."

"This is madness," she said. "You could not have given your proposal any thought."

He continued as if she had made no objections. "I promise to stop ravishing women, except you of course. I never cheated at cards, well once but for a good reason. I'll avoid duels. Most of them were over women anyway. I'll even discuss my war experiences with you sometime. You are right. I have become *outré* since my return from the battlefields."

Cassie shook her head to dislodge his unbelievable offer. "What can you possibly gain by marrying me?"

His frown deepened. He must have expected her to swoon with joy at his generous proposal.

"I need a wife," he said. "I have to beget an heir. Best to be over and done with it."

He had almost offered for her. Did this give her an advantage? "You are a lord and not unattractive. You could command far better than me."

He took a step closer. For an instant, she thought he might crush her into his arms. She cast about for the power to resist.

“Other women try to please me. But you . . .”

“What makes me different?” she said.

“Yesterday, you confronted me. You challenged me. You invited me to kiss you.”

In this battle of wills and won'ts, she pressed home her slim advantage. “Are you in love with me?”

He looked startled. “Madam, I hardly know you.”

Blake falling on his knees and admitting he'd fallen in love at first sight was too much to expect.

Cassie thrust again. “You would let me do whatever I want? No need to ask your permission?”

His grin turned into a leering smile. “Of course not. What excitement we'll have. Screams, doors slammed, a little wrestling. Followed by . . .”

She could guess the rest of his thoughts. *He expects to spend his life stirring me to explode. And his bizarre proposal arrives at the moment I've vowed to abandon my reckless ways.*

“You look forward to these set-tos?” she

asked.

His eyebrows bobbed with mischief.

She made fists to keep from saying what she thought. "Thereafter, you would conquer me with passionate lovemaking."

He wagged his head in agreement. Today at least, he was honest.

She moved backward until she pressed against the mullions. "Do I appear to be the same woman you met yesterday?"

"You seem a bit dazed. You'll recover soon enough."

"Since you are a man, there is little possibility you will understand, but I will endeavor to explain. Yesterday, you found me attractive because I controlled my destiny or I thought I did. Now, you control my future. I could fight endlessly, and I would always lose."

When she considered marriage, which she rarely did, she wished for a man who would calm her wilder nature. Someone who encouraged her to be feminine. If such a man existed, she had little hope of luring him into matrimony.

Blake leaned his shoulder against a bookcase. Though he appeared relaxed, his muscles looked coiled to spring. "You're still

angry because I deceived you? Woman, you can't dismiss me so easily."

"On the contrary." She lifted her chin demurely. She considered fluttering her eyelashes, but that tactic seemed dishonest. "I accept your marriage proposal."

"You do?" His eyes narrowed. "Wait now. I haven't offered for you. I just want us to get acquainted. See if we suit in all things."

"I must force myself to do what pleases you. Be exciting and tantalizing. You must give me lessons in what amuses you."

"That's not what I want!"

The man took to pacing. Back and forth across the rug, he nearly bumped into the large desk in the middle of the room.

She let out a mournful sigh. "In spite of your taunts, I will be a dutiful and obedient wife. I will supervise your household, plan your parties, and host your friends. I will come to your bed, and I will bear your children." The fire he craved lit up inside her. As she marched across the room, she pushed his arm aside. She opened the door and shouted back at him, "But I will be damned if I'll screech and run about like some trained monkey!"

She slammed the door and regretted the action immediately. She was staring at the

quivering door when he yanked it open.

“Aha,” he said. “You’re full of raging passion. You can’t smother it forever. I can outlast you, Cassie. And then you’ll give me what I want.”

Yes, temper he could pull from her and sexual passion. She took a few breaths to regain her composure. The intake of air didn’t help. “I apologize for slamming the door. You have no idea what you’re proposing. If we marry, I will no longer be the woman you admire. What I hope for is a husband who appreciates who I am and helps me become a better person. Calm, thoughtful, under control. To find such a fellow, I must be free to accept or reject any marriage proposal. But now, I must comply with your wishes. If I earn your approval, I will be forced to marry you.” She may have ruined her chances, but he deserved the truth. Marriage on his terms would be a horror. God help their innocent children. “May I be excused? I’m planning to have a megrim.”

Cassie was halfway up the staircase when she heard his tread behind her. He took the steps two at a time. She quickened her pace but knew he would outrun her. At the recessed doorway to her bedroom, she turned to him. She lowered her eyes so he couldn’t see the

flames of anger in them. "Am I to have no privacy? Very well, what do you command, milord?"

"Cassie, don't act like this. You're being foolish."

"You wouldn't want a fool for a wife. From now on, I will be wise. Wise and sober and solemn."

Opening the door, she half expected him to follow her inside. But he did not.

She closed the door behind her and slid to the floor. Across the room, the French doors beckoned. If she opened them, she could climb down an ivy trellis, run to the stable and find Valor. She would ride him bareback to the sea, not stopping until they were both drenched in salt water.

Tears were for those who could not act. What actions did she have left? She must entertain Lord Rayneford in hopes he would marry her. Making as little noise as possible, she cried. She kept her sobs from turning into a loud, hair-pulling, wall-pounding torrent. Her suitor might be standing outside her door. Suitor, she cringed at the word. She would fling herself off the balcony before she'd let him know he'd won. Instead, she cried for all her past mistakes, for her thoughtless behavior

and the often terrible consequences. And she
cried for the end of Cassiopeia Valient.

Chapter 4

Cassie Chooses

The rest of the morning, Cassie kept to her room. She ventured out on the balcony when sorrow threatened to get the best of her.

Early afternoon, Lady Rayneford knocked on her door. "Are you rested? Come then and join me in the greenhouse. I'm cutting flowers to brighten the dining room." When Cassie joined her, Blake's mother said, "I'm so glad you've decided to give my son a chance to know you."

Cassie tried to smile, but her mouth felt like she'd just eaten a sour pickle. She did not wish to discuss her potential groom. Perhaps she could find the real Dan Durgan and join him in highway robbery. How many holdups would she need to raise enough money for repairs? Illusions, all illusions.

After an hour in the greenhouse, Cassie burst through a door to the outside. The indoor humidity made her crave fresh air.

Grace walked beside her through the back

garden. "Blake likes the natural look. That's why we have no ugly statuary, no silly mazes or garish fountains."

Cassie cradled an armful of camellias. "Curved pathways. Not the usual straight lines. And a riotous mix of early blooms. Lady Rayneford, this is heavenly." If she had to marry the rogue, at least she could enjoy his lovely garden.

"Dear one, you are my guest. Please call me Grace."

"Thank you for the honor. I will."

"My son is quite taken with you. He's already behaving with more civility."

Speak of the devil and he appeared. The man never walked, he either strode or swaggered. Despite her efforts, Cassie thrilled to see him. He was deucedly dashing. Some of his pale hair fell over his forehead. The rest streamed behind him. Sharp-boned face and high cheekbones, he had the look of a Viking warrior. Blood of those ancient invaders must flow through his veins.

Stomping mud off his boots before setting foot on the flagstone terrace, Blake kissed his mother's cheek and whispered in her ear. The woman smiled and excused herself.

Cassie stiffened. "Good afternoon, milord."

He paced, though not as close to her as he had this morning. "We are supposed to get to know one another. This morning, you reluctantly agreed."

She sat down in a wrought iron chair and placed the camellias on the glass-topped table. To avoid looking at him, she pulled scissors from her apron pocket and clipped leaves from the camellia stems. Some of the leaves were stubborn, so she yanked them off.

"Are we not doing so?" Honey dripped from every word. "Are you familiar with the language of flowers? Roses are for love, camellias for gratitude, thorn apples for disguise." Too bad she hadn't found any thorn apples. She could be hacking them to pieces as they spoke.

He slapped his hands on the table. "Stop it."

She folded her gloved hands across her bosom. "You object to my arranging flowers?"

"I hate women who prattle, who simper, who flirt, who make inane conversation and expect me to respond."

"I am so sorry, milord. I will mend my ways. Will you be so kind as to write a list of the deficiencies you find in women. I will adjust my behavior accordingly."

She lowered her eyes, but she could feel him glowering.

“You’re doing this to irritate me, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. I thought you wanted to argue and spar with me.”

This man’s masculinity, his power drew her to him. She could get lost in his sensual appeal.

He sucked in a deep breath and blew it out in a gust. “Do you think you could ever care for me?”

“If circumstances were different . . .”

She was about to add, “Even then I doubt it”, but he interrupted. “I’ll change the circumstances.”

“How so?”

He paced again. His boot heels clicked on the stones. “I’ll lend your father the money he needs.”

Opening one’s mouth in awe was considered rude. Instead, Cassie clamped her teeth together. “Why would you do that?”

Blake sighed as if the answer should be obvious. “So you won’t have to be nice to me. You can be yourself.”

“I see.”

She shook her head. Like most men, Blake

must think all things were simple. He didn't understand that until her father repaid the debt, Cassie could not be herself. She would have to perform for him. Be exciting, amorous and enticing. At least she wouldn't have to marry the blackguard.

"There must be other conditions to your offer."

"I should ask some questions, I suppose. That much money will take time to pull together." He scraped a wrought iron chair back from the table. He sat so close he could probably count her eyelashes. "Why didn't your father borrow money from bankers or his neighbors? Why didn't he have a reserve for emergencies?"

"My father's greatest fault is his generosity."

"Generosity is usually a virtue."

"I promise to restrain my father from allowing any of our tenants to get behind in their rent, always for good reasons of course. I will stop him from lending money to his friends, some who repay, some who do not. I will insist he demand payment from those who seek his medical care."

"Medical care?" Blake asked.

"At Cambridge, my father trained to be a

doctor.”

“Ah.” He smiled. “And this generous man confines his practice to those who can’t afford to pay.”

“Oh we are paid,” Cassie said. “With eggs, live chickens, jams, and jellies. Home-brewed wine. Sometimes lace doilies. Lovely embroidered handkerchiefs, napkins, and pillowcases. And animal figures whittled from oak and ash branches.”

“Without meeting him, I like your father. Why won’t his neighbors or the banks loan him money?”

“Because of his political views.”

“He’s an anarchist?”

“No, he’s a liberal Whig. Fair wages for servants, no enclosures or Corn Laws. Laws to allow tenants to buy their farms at reasonable prices. He advocated for ending the slave trade.”

His hard stare made her want to squirm. *Does he think I lie or exaggerate? Or does he wonder why I speak the truth?*

Blake stretched his legs out under the table. His boot rubbed against her half-booted foot. She refused to move out of his way.

“You must not force your father’s patients to pay in cash,” he said. “What about

relatives? None of them can help?”

“My uncle, Sydney Willoughby, contacted my father’s debtors. He convinced a few to send money, but the rest cried poor. Uncle Syd lent us as much as he could. The total is not near enough.”

“I’ve met your uncle. He’s married to your father’s sister Patience. She in turn is my mother’s best friend. Which is how Mother heard about you. If I lend your father five hundred and fifty pounds, will you stay at Green Garden for several weeks? To see if you can find any virtue in me.”

His words sounded less like questions and more like conditions. “Will you stop baiting and irritating me?”

As if licking off jam, he ran his tongue over his upper lip. “Woman, you ask too much.”

In her head, Cassie made plans to speed up the debt’s repayment. She would convince her father to move the family into the estate manager’s cottage for the summer. Since they couldn’t afford a manager, the cottage had stood empty for years. They could rent the main house to vacationers from London. She and her sisters would make do with their current wardrobes. And no trips to the

seashore. After she returned home, she might find employment in Nottingham. Even so, they would need a year or more to save the money. Blake hadn't mentioned what interest rate he would charge.

Cassie kicked his boot. He didn't move. "I am not the same woman you met in an overturned carriage. I will never be her again."

"Yes you are," Blake said. "You are as full of mischief as I am. We will wreak havoc together."

Cassie rose to her feet. So much for her plan to become thoughtful and feminine. Until her father repaid the loan, she must play the part Blake chose for her.

She picked up the camellias. "I will find a vase for these. May I be dismissed, or do you require something else of me?"

~ ~ ~

Blake watched Cassie walk in through the kitchen door. She was miserable. He was miserable. Despite her protests, she was the same passionate woman he met yesterday on the River Road. Just now as she talked, she brandished the scissors like a weapon. He wondered how the flowers managed to cling

to their stems. Knowing how much she resented him gave him cold chills.

Mother called from the greenhouse. "Blake, how are you getting on with Cassie?"

"Badly."

"Is that because you spent overlong escorting her through Sherwood Forest?"

"I didn't offend her. Well, I did some."

"Come in here," she ordered. "Tell me what you did. Omit nothing."

Hands stuffed in his jacket pockets, he sauntered inside the glass building. He would be delighted to tell Mother how he played the outlaw. But then he would have to reveal the reason for his ruse.

"As a gentleman, I cannot reveal all. Cassie bound me to keep one secret."

"If I find you're dissembling, I'll horsewhip you."

"Yes, Mother." He hoisted himself to sit on the edge of the potting table.

"I invited Cassie to visit so you two could become acquainted," she said. "To see if marriage is a possibility."

"She agreed to visit because she sees no other way to save her family estate."

Mother poked some sort of bulb into a pot of damp soil. "I visited River's Leap because

my friend Patience said Cassie was headstrong and wild. When I met her, I knew she could almost match your recklessness. Her father put the wrong ideas into her head. He let her act like a boy. Now she thinks like a man. I hoped the two of you would fall instantly in love. Apparently, I am proved wrong.”

Only half-wrong. Love didn't seem the right word for his feelings. Love should be wonderful, not by turns wretched, infuriating, and frustrating. Added to this list was his primal yearning for Cassie's touch, her kiss, plus more possibilities he shouldn't let himself imagine.

“After all my years of avoiding romance, you introduce me to the perfect woman.”

Mother cocked her head. “The perfect woman? How so?”

“Cassie and I are both at odds with what society requires. We enjoy breaking the rules.”

“Such is not the usual description of the perfect match,” Mother said.

Since the Duke himself sent him home from the battlefield, misery and dark moods had been Blake's close companions. To relieve his desolation, he tried fast horses and willing women, fights and carousing, dangerous dares and to hell with tomorrow. Those pursuits

distracted him, but they couldn't repair his aching soul.

Yesterday, Cassie outlined his sins, including the charge that he lacked courage in battle. She despised him for everything his mother told her. This dark beauty told him off and fought with him. Yet every minute with her, he became more enchanted. Since she popped through the carriage door, not one devilish inclination had tempted him. Cassie was as much an outcast as he was.

"To have Cassie, I must destroy her."

Mother pointed her trowel at his stomach. "Destroy her? What are you talking about?"

"Just now on the terrace, I offered to lend her father the money he needs."

"Oh, Blake, how kind of you. Until I visited River's Leap, I had no idea how much flood damage they suffered. Your loan will solve all their problems."

"For such a great deal of money, I expect something in return."

"James will repay you. Cassie will make sure of it."

"Mother, why did you tell Cassie every stupid, dangerous thing I've done in the past year and a half?"

"Perhaps, I shouldn't have, but I wanted to

be honest. You can be difficult.”

As the highwayman, Cassie found him romantic and exciting. But his lies turned her enthusiasm into hate. “When we arrived last evening, she wanted to leave as soon as her carriage was available. When I offered to loan her father money, she gritted her teeth and talked prattle.”

“From her point of view, Cassie must endure you, not because she enjoys your company but because she and her family will be in your debt.”

“You understand women. How can I make Cassie love me?”

“My addleheaded son, you cannot make someone love you.” She looked out through the glass. Was she remembering her loveless marriage to his father? “First, Cassie must have the freedom to love you. As long as her father owes you money, she lacks that freedom.”

He stuck his finger in the pot’s wet soil. “I should just give her father the money?”

His mother smacked the back of his hand with her trowel. The woman still packed a wallop. “Then, she would owe you even more. Is there some roundabout way for James to receive the money without Cassie suspecting

you are the source of his good fortune?"

"The men who owe him money could suddenly repay him." *More devious dealings. Even if she learns the truth, Cassie should admire my generosity.* "I'll buy up their loans. If his debtors promise not to reveal my involvement, I'll write off a percentage of what they will then owe me."

Mother said, "Between releasing the funds and visiting these men, you will be absent for a week or more. Meanwhile, Cassie will wonder where you are. Could your solicitor Sir Stephen Gilbert act as your agent?"

Mother's plan intrigued him. Stephen was his best friend. For the past year, he'd been his only true friend. "Tomorrow morning, I'll ride to his estate in Grimsby and lay out your plan. He has my power of attorney to secure the funds. He'll draw up new loan contracts." Blake jumped down from the table.

As he headed for the door, she grabbed his sleeve. "Relief for her family's financial burdens will not make Cassie love you."

Five hundred fifty pounds isn't enough? "What else?"

Mother returned to poking bulbs into dirt-filled pots. "You must court her."

Blake screwed up his face as if something

smelled of rot. “Flowers, assembly dances, sitting on too-small parlor furniture and drinking weak tea from tiny teacups? I’ve never done that in my life. I’d be disappointed if Cassie wants me to.”

“Only make yourself charming. With effort, you can be pleasant.”

“How long would this infernal courtship last?”

“The length will be up to Cassie. You want her to choose you of her own free will.”

“I do.” Women knew about other women. Mother was the wisest woman he knew.

“There is a third condition,” she said.

Blake stepped closer to the door. “Will this doomed campaign never end?”

“I promise this is the last. To truly let Cassie choose, she must meet other candidates for marriage. All her life she’s been stuck out in the country. Her father admits to scaring off any suitors so she would remain home to help him run the estate.”

“What if she finds a man she likes better than me?” He knew hundreds of men more appealing than himself.

“Indeed. What if she does? That’s what freedom means, dear boy. Cassie chooses.”

Chapter 5

“Clouds Burst, Skies Flash”

Cassie hadn't seen Blake since yesterday afternoon when he offered to loan her father the money he needed. Soon after she agreed to his conditions, he saddled up Valor and rode east. She assumed he was visiting his bank for the funds and his solicitor to draw up the loan contract. In his absence, she practiced the art of deception. In her room, she pretended to be Blake, baiting, teasing, and enraging. Depending on his provocation, she rehearsed her part as a shrew, seductress, or violent hoyden. Though emotionally exhausted, Cassie believed she was ready for him.

Grace said Blake should return that afternoon. When the sky grew dark, Cassie donned her nightgown and robe. She should be relieved he hadn't shown up. Instead, she was disappointed.

The balcony was the only place in the house where she could be herself. She rested her hands on the stone railing. One by one,

the stars lit up. Unbinding her hair, she shook the tresses loose. She ran her fingers through the tangles. The cool night air ruffled the strands. Stepping out of her slippers, she kicked them back into the room. The chilly stone floor tantalized her bare feet.

“Ah, what light through yonder window breaks?”

Startled by Blake’s voice, she jumped. Dimly, she saw him standing on the balcony of the next room. His arms folded, he leaned his body across the railing.

“What comes next?” he yelled.

“It is the east, and Juliet is the sun’.” Though happy to see him, she was unhappy he’d invaded her privacy.

“The fairest stars in the heaven sparkle in her eyes’,” he quoted. “Do I have the words right?”

“Close enough.” Cassie thought to clasp her hair behind her neck, but the dark sky kept him from seeing her clearly.

“See how she leans her cheek against her hand,” he quoted. “You must lean, fair Juliet. You’re not fair but never mind. I know the rest of this.”

Her cheek against her palm, Cassie leaned her elbow on the railing.

“Oh, that I were a glove,” Blake said, “that I might caress her cheek. With my fingers tweak her nose, then stroke one fingertip along her moist and tender lips.”

He had demolished one of her favorite passages. Cassie stood up. “Those are not Shakespeare’s words.”

“Shakespeare could use a little help. Now Romeo climbs the trellis and clambers into Juliet’s room.”

She hoped he wouldn’t reenact that part of the scene. Even at this distance, he was crowding her.

“If I run downstairs and into the garden and call up to you,” he said, “you will lock the balcony door and snuggle up in your bed.”

What mischief was he plotting?
“Undoubtedly.”

“Then I must again rewrite the bard.”

Before she could protest, Blake hopped onto his balcony railing and grabbed a rain gutter. Hand over hand, he crossed the distance between the two balconies. Her heart pounded in her mouth. If his hand slipped or the gutter came loose, he would fall two stories and be impaled on the lilac bushes.

This was Blake; the soldier, the outlaw, the rule breaker. Shirttails flapping, long legs

swinging, he crossed the space and leaped onto her balcony. He wasn't even out of breath.

"You," she sputtered. "You cannot be here."

"But here I am." He brushed rust off his hands. "I am your Romeo. Though don't expect me to take poison for you. I have a strong constitution, but I detest being sick."

In spite of herself, laughter spilled out. "I believe Juliet chose the wrong man. Romeo was too simple-mindedly in love. I repeat, you cannot be here. This is my bedroom, and my hair is unbound."

Blake closed the French doors. "This is out of doors. We are allowed more freedom here than when we are inside. Besides, no one can see us."

"To you, anything is acceptable as long as no one sees?" *Is he baiting me, or is this normal conversation for him?*

"I have limits," he admitted, "but there are so many silly rules. Like it being unseemly to see you with your hair down. When we met beside the road, you shook your hair loose. Since then, I've pictured your tresses flying, but my memory fell short of . . . Oh my."

He reached for her flying tresses but pulled

back as if he'd been slapped. "We are courting. I'm allowed certain liberties."

"Yes, milord."

Middle of the night visits to her bedroom were beyond such liberties. She preferred to be the one who broke the rules.

"Please stop calling me 'milord'. You do it to irritate me."

"I do, milord. What would you prefer? Scoundrel? Liar? Rakehell?" What reaction did he want now? To please him, Cassie needed more clues.

His mouth drooped in sadness. "When I was a child, my mother called me her 'Little Bunny'."

She laughed. "You want me to call you 'Little Bunny'?"

"Only when we are beneath the bedcovers and scantily clad."

"Blake, then?" She wanted to ask if he'd seen her father and offered the promised loan. But she would sound mercenary. "Your outrageous behavior is disconcerting."

His hands clasped behind his back, he walked around the small area. She thought of standing out of his way, but for the time being this was her balcony.

"Cassie," he said, "I am trying to be

charming. Mother said such behavior might win you.”

She stifled another laugh. “You need considerable instruction before you are ready for polite society.”

He stopped inches from her shoulder. “Instruct me.”

His warm breath against her ear sent shivers through her. A deep swallow didn’t relieve the tingling on the roof of her mouth.

If she didn’t say something, she would burst. “I should instruct you in how to be charming?”

Without touching her, he flattened his hand on the railing next to her flexed fingers. She’d be damned if she pulled her hand away.

“Please,” he cooed. “How does a man charm a woman?”

“Well, um. Let me see.” She took a deep breath and hoped he didn’t notice. “You might begin by asking what the woman cares about, her ambitions, though women aren’t allowed to have ambitions. Ask about her childhood, her family, what she reads.” She waited for him to speak, but he remained mute. “Then you may offer information about yourself. Not about gambling and brawling, but about your family, your experiences, what you care

about.”

“Where do I begin? Tell me how.”

This was his game, but she could change the rules. She wouldn’t respond as he wanted but with the words and gestures she chose. He was trying to be charming. His baiting would come later.

Her hands gripped the railing. She stretched her stiff fingers and smoothed them over her hips. “Something simple. The stars interest me. They would be a safe jumping off point.”

Blake stared at the pinpricks of light in the dark sky. “Which star are you named for?”

“Cassiopeia isn’t a star. She’s a constellation.” She pointed. “There between the North Star and the Big Dipper.”

She glanced at him. He wasn’t following her finger, he was studying her. “Didn’t she do something horrible? I mean the original Cassiopeia?”

She had to look away or her swallowing and sighing would be endless. “My namesake was vain about her beauty. When her boasting angered Poseidon, she had to sacrifice her daughter to a sea monster. I wasn’t named for the Greek goddess. I was named for the stars. My youngest sister is Lyra, named for the Harp

constellation.” Cassie pointed to that sister’s place in the sky. “My other sister is Selene.”

“Ah, Selene. The easiest one to find,” he said. “The goddess of the moon.”

He slid behind her, so close his shirt touched her robe. She should turn away. But the nearer he came, the less she wanted to retreat.

Desire flowed from him. She longed for his fingertips stroking her hand, his palm against her cheek. Since she must visit for a while to see if they suited, he was entitled to a few liberties. No one would know. But Cassie wanted more than his touch. She wanted the caress of his lips against hers, his arms around her waist. Such wantonness would encourage him. With enough encouragement, she might throw consequences to the wind and follow wherever he led.

She bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood. If he discovered the strength of her passion, he could control her.

He didn’t touch her. “What must I do to make you love me?”

Is he talking about making love or being in love?

“Wait. I’m getting ahead of myself,” he amended. “How do I make you like me even a

little?"

At those words, Cassie knew his secret weakness. If she were devious, she might be able to control him. She turned around. His eyes brimmed with longing. He held himself together with sheer will power. If she tempted him, made promises and quickly withdrew them, she could drive him to delirium.

She didn't want him to control her. Why would she inflict the same fate on him? "You would be disappointed if I loved you."

"Madam, you talk nonsense."

"Love changes people," she said. "Think of the women who have loved you. That confounded emotion makes a woman docile and mewling. She sighs over the man she adores and turns herself inside out to please him. You want me to spew fire and passion. If you conquer me with love, my fire dies. I become a hearth cat lying at your feet."

"Fire will always burn within you."

She'd been teasing, but what if she did let herself love him? Would her words come true? She'd seen her strong-minded friends turn to soggy mush over their beaux.

"If you loved me, you would change," she said. "You'd be calm and gentle, considerate and kind. You would spend your days trying

to fulfill my every wish.”

“Never!” he roared.

“You see. Neither of us wants romantic love.”

“I’ll never be that cow-eyed and bumble-brained. Do you want such a man as your husband?”

“Some people enjoy being civil to each other. Perhaps there is more to being in love than we realize.”

He rolled his shoulders. “Good night, madam. Allow me to take my leave. You have filled my head with enough disturbing thoughts to keep me tossing ‘til dawn.”

He climbed onto the railing and grabbed the gutter. As he moved hand over hand, she watched him dangle in open air. He leapt onto the far balcony. Without a glance toward her, he disappeared into his room.

She too would have a fitful night’s sleep.

~ ~ ~

Over the next ten days, Blake made up his own rules of courtship. He tried sneaking up from behind and scaring a cry out of Cassie. Her reaction sent him into peals of laughter. Sometimes he followed that by falling on the floor so he could look up at her plaintively. He

boosted her into his favorite tree, then joined her on a climb to near the top. Another day, they rode to the mouth of the River Trent for a picnic. He shed his boots and stockings and waded in the water. He splashed her until she laughed, but she kept her boots on.

Every time he thought she enjoyed his company, Blake remembered she had to be nice so her family would get the loan he had promised. He longed for Stephen to report James's debtors had "repaid" what they owed. Only then, would Cassie be free.

That morning, Blake was eating breakfast with her. Satisfied he would behave, Mother had excused herself as their chaperone.

The sky glowered, threatening to let loose a torrent of rain. To the west, thunder rumbled. That moment before a storm when anything is possible, the air crackled with electricity. His blood raced in anticipation.

Cassie also made his blood race. Not just from longing to make love to her, but by how often she surprised him. Whatever he expected, she did the opposite. Over a week ago, they met in Sherwood Forest because she had organized her own kidnapping. After she'd maligned him unmercifully, she'd offered her lips and perhaps more. When he expected her

to eagerly accept his marriage offer, she raged at him. When he offered a loan instead, she outlined reasons why he should reconsider.

“Clouds burst, skies flash,” he quoted.

“You know Lord Byron?” Cassie asked.

“Never met the man.”

“I mean his poetry.”

He’d heard the phrase but didn’t know the author. “How does the rest go?” Anything to get her to talk to him.

Cassie tilted back her head and spoke to the ceiling. “Oh dreadful hour! More fiercely pours the storm!”

“You admire that bounder?” he taunted. “He’s more the cad than I am.”

Her glower was almost as ominous as the sky. “But you, Lord Rayneford do not write poetry worth reciting.”

He lost another one to her. Though she could charm him, he liked her sharp remarks better. He watched her spread peach preserves on a scone while he wondered how sharp the knife was.

“Blake, I have been at Green Garden for two weeks.”

“That long?” he mused. Enduring her parry to his every thrust seemed like forever.

“We made a bargain.”

“That’s the only reason you’re still here?” He hoped she might reply that she found him amusing.

Instead, she paid more attention to her breakfast than to him. “Repairing our embankments and draining fields must begin soon. Spring planting can’t be deferred much longer.”

He dropped his napkin. “I have set things in motion. Funds released. Contracts and such. The execution takes time.”

“I appreciate your efforts. As soon as my father receives the money, I must go home.”

“You are visiting so we can become friends. One week is not enough time.” To get Cassie to like him, a lifetime might not be enough. Even when she irritated him on purpose, he wanted her to stay. He couldn’t wage his campaign if she was miles away at River’s Leap.

“My father needs my help.”

The woman may be uncomfortable taking his money, but she freely admitted she wished to be shunt of his company.

“Are you afraid he’ll be too generous with the loan money?” An unkind remark, but Blake didn’t like being rebuffed. Maybe the two of them didn’t suit after all.

Cassie didn't lash out as he expected. "My father is not as young as he once was, and he's never been good at bargaining with contractors."

He stared goggle eyed. "You intend to deal with tradesmen?"

She raised her chin. "I will also supervise the repairs."

This woman overestimated herself. "Why would those men deal with you?"

"On my father's word they do. I often accompany him on his rounds. We work together."

"Your father flatters you, letting you think you have authority. He has spoilt you. He does the hiring. He supervises. He merely allows you to tag along."

She had that look again, the one he'd come to both welcome and dread. Cassie was something to behold; glowing with rage, fire almost shooting from her eyes, like a dragon cornered in her cave. If there were male dragons, there must be females, or else where did baby dragons come from?

"My father does not flatter me." She clipped her words like fingernail droppings. "Nor does he patronize me as you are doing. He taught me how to run our estate. I am an

excellent student.”

Her lips were firm, always a good indication of the firestorm to come.

“You know how to run an estate?” he said. “The details of cultivation?”

“Yes.” A one word answer seemed all her self-control allowed.

“Mending fences, digging ditches, tree removal?”

She continued his list. “Accounts payable and receivable. Rents and shares, repair and purchase of farm implements. Animal husbandry.”

His mouth gaped. “Animal husbandry?”

Cassie swallowed a grin. “Pigs, sheep, cows, horses, chickens, each in their own fashion. Are there niceties on which you need enlightenment?”

What kind of man would teach his daughter about the sex lives of chickens? “Your father is either mad or inept.”

As soon as those words left his mouth, he knew he was about to lose. But this far into their game, he couldn’t quit.

Brandishing her bread knife, Cassie jumped to her feet. “If I were a man, I would challenge you to a duel.”

He tilted back in his chair. Would she stab

him if the knife were sharper? “My dear, you are not a man. Your father has coddled and confused you.”

She leaned over until her nose was inches from his. “I can out fence you, out ride you, out fish you, and out shoot you. I can run an estate as well or better than you do. I can beat you at cards, cricket, tennis, and if I were taller, boxing.”

Hers was a challenge no man could let go unanswered. Blake sprang to his feet, hoping his height would quell her. Trying to confront him eye to eye, she stood on tiptoes.

Thunder rolled across the sky, shaking the window panes, sending shivers through the floor. He should take the roar as an ill omen. But if he and this woman might someday share hearth and home, bed and bread, kith and kin, one of them had to take charge. That spouse would not be Cassie. He hated to break her spirit, but eventually she would understand this was for her own good. To think, he was the one being level-headed.

Through barely parted lips, he said, “Madam, it is about to rain.”

Cassie became shorter going flatfooted as she glanced out the window. “I know. More flooding.”

That was not what he meant. "At the moment, riding, fishing, shooting, tennis and estate tending are out of the question, and Mother disapproves of fencing matches in the house."

"So?"

"That leaves cards."

He had to admit she surprised him again. Cassie was certainly bold enough to run an estate. He baited her because she threatened to leave. Of course, making her angry would not keep her here.

"I don't know," she said. "Your mother said you cheat at cards."

"Not entirely unfounded," he said.

"You admit to the crime?"

"One time, I gulled a Spaniard out of his magnificent horse. He'd bruised the creature's mouth with an oversized bit. Sadly, the man played cards better than I. Cheating was the only way I could rescue the animal."

"Valor," she said.

He was sure he'd gained her sympathy, but cards made a poor contest. Unless one played for hours, luck mattered as much as skill. Neither of them could sit still for more than twenty minutes.

While he cast about for another challenge,

she said, "Billiards."

"Billiards? That was not on your list of superlatives."

"The list I quoted is not exhaustive. Unless you have no talent for the game."

His skills were rusty, but he had the advantage of strength and reach. "To the billiards room, milady."

Chapter 6

A Noble Game of Billiards

Minutes later, Cassie paced the Men's Parlor. Her challenge should have been simpler, something she might possibly win. But rain and wind, thunder and lightning always drove her wild. At such times, she shouldn't be held responsible for her actions. However, she would suck on copper pennies before she let Blake guess her weakness.

As he retrieved the striking cues, maces, and ivory balls from a closet, she said, "You wanted to see me in a fit of temper. I commend your success, but the show is over. This game is unnecessary."

He handed her a cue. "You can't be superior at all those skills. No one is as good as you claim."

"You mean no woman."

His teasing eyes no longer teased. "No person can be."

"You intend to oppose me in every activity until you beat me at something?"

“Be assured, I will win most contests.”

She'd made an idle boast. With most men, her challenge would not have been idle. “And if you are wrong, and I best you at some pursuits?”

“I will admit you are extraordinary.”

The six-pocket mahogany billiard table was about five feet wide and at least nine feet long. One red and two white balls rested in the middle of the green baize cloth. The cloth was pristine and the mahogany unscratched. The table hadn't been used much, so perhaps Blake was out of practice.

He chalked his leather tipped cue. “There should be something at stake.”

“I have nothing of value.”

With an appreciative glance, he eyed the parts of her he could see.

She gripped her cue. “Not unless we are married.”

“I don't want to ‘win’ your affection,” he said. “I want you to offer it freely.”

“My grandmother's garnet ring.” Cassie pulled the keepsake off her finger and laid it on the table. “This is very precious to me.”

Blake lined up the three balls. “For my part, let's say I put up five hundred fifty pounds.”

“Absolutely not. That would be a wildly unequal bet.”

“If you win, you won’t have to spend any more time with me.”

“You are that sure you can beat me? Or would you let me win because . . .?” If he had tired of her, he would boot her out the door and throw her clothes off the balcony. So why did he offer such an enormous bet?

Blake half nodded, half shrugged. The gesture implied he refused to answer either question. “What would you consider a suitable wager?”

Frightened by the storm, a horse whinnied in the stable.

“Valor,” she said.

His mouth fell open. “My horse? Woman, how dare you.”

“You value your horse as much as I cherish my grandmother’s ring. As for what each would bring on the open market, your horse is worth more now. However, since he is a gelding, my ring will be worth more in the future.”

“A gelding? You noticed?”

“Animal husbandry,” she reminded him. “What do you say to the bet?”

He glanced out the window. Rain streaked

the small panes. Far above, Cassie heard the steady beat of water on the roof.

He walked toward her, then behind her, and came around on her other side. She tried not to flinch. This man rattled her more than the storm did.

“Not that I expect to lose,” he said, “but will you treat Valor with loving care?”

“And you won’t pawn my ring or give it to some coquette?”

“Agreed. Your ring for my horse. In my opinion, this is the most unequal bargain since Napoleon sold almost half a continent to Thomas Jefferson.” Blake moved to the far end of the table. “First one with ten points wins?”

She would need time to get the feel of the table, the balance of the cue, and a notion of his style. “Twenty-one points.”

“If you have the stamina, Miss Valient.”

At the end of the table, they stood side by side. She lined up her white ball, black dot on top. He did the same with his plain white ball. They both leaned down. They both eyed down their cues. They both shot their ivory balls.

Without looking up, Cassie knew Blake’s ball went farther because he had more strength.

His greater distance meant he went first.

He handed her the red target ball. She rolled it to the middle of the table. On his first shot, he scored a two point cannon by striking his cue ball first against the red ball and then against her white one. On his second shot, his daring carom missed by half an inch.

Is he trying to intimidate me or just showing off?

On her first shot, Cassie nudged the red ball and missed his white one completely. He had given her a well-balanced cue. In silence, they took turns until Blake had six points and she had five. She was better at potting, striking balls into pockets. He was better at cannons.

At the start of her next turn, he asked, "What else did your father teach you?"

She'd used this ploy herself, distracting the other player with something emotional to break his concentration. "Some science. A lot of mathematics. Whatever I asked him about."

Blake had as much bunched up energy as she did. If Cassie could stay calm while she riled him, she would have the advantage.

"I would like to propose a rule," he said. "No more conversation until we finish the game."

On Blake's turn, Cassie observed his

method. He studied the lay of the balls, then made dramatic shots. Some were wildly successful, some were rank failures. When the score stood at nineteen points for him and fifteen for her, she laid her cue on the table. She wanted to stretch her arms over her head, but Blake would be titillated no end. Instead, she plopped down on the sofa. The room had no chairs.

Blake sat beside her. "Did your mother teach you any feminine skills?"

"I had tutors, but I was not apt. My singing scares the birds, my fingers are too clumsy for the pianoforte, and my sewing leads to pricked fingers and uneven handiwork."

"Nothing feminine at all?"

"I like to garden. And to dance."

"Languages? Have you any French, Italian, Greek, German? Spanish perhaps?"

He could probably seduce a woman in any European language.

She shook her head. "I can swear in Mandarin, and I know an excellent Icelandic curse. Other languages escaped me."

"Your father taught you to curse?"

"No, Samuel did. Before he came to us, he had traveled widely."

He slapped his hands on his knees. "Why

did your father teach you subjects that are useless to a woman?"

She could not ignore his dig. "Because I asked him to. When my mother died, we both felt lost. I followed him around afraid he'd disappear from my life, too. I asked what he was doing and he explained. I begged to go with him and he took me along. I was eager to learn and he enjoyed seeing me excel."

"He's proud of your manly talents?"

"He is proud of me."

Cassie returned to the mahogany table. Leaning over the rail, she lined up her shot. Every time she strained for a far ball, her lace collar nearly choked her. Hoping he wouldn't notice, she flipped the button free. He noticed.

"What did you learn from your father?" she asked.

"I thought we weren't going to talk."

"I can talk and shoot at the same time. What about your father?"

"I learned nothing," he said.

Should she aim for the red target or his white ball? "I know your father was an admiral in the Royal Navy, but he must have come home sometimes."

"He came once to marry my mother, once to begat my older sister Lydia, and once to

begat me. Rarely afterward.”

She should stop asking about his father. Tension hunched Blake’s shoulders. She wasn’t looking for a game advantage. She genuinely wanted to know about his childhood.

“Why did he avoid coming home?”

Blake walked to the far side of the table. “My father did not want to marry. When he reached his thirties, his parents insisted he produce an heir. So he married my mother.”

“Was your mother satisfied with the arrangement?”

Blake scowled. “Satisfied, I suppose. Not happy.”

Grace had mentioned his father was the cause of some of Blake’s bad behavior. “You missed having a father. Did he and your mother get along?”

“I don’t believe my father cared much for the company of women. Or of children’s company either. He barely spoke to my mother or Lydia and me, so I can’t say he liked or disliked us. When he was at home, Mother tried to get his attention. When she couldn’t interest him, I tried misbehaving. He would lock me in my room so he didn’t have to see me. Finally, I gave up and did whatever I wanted. Or as much as Mother would allow.”

How sad not to know your father. “If he rarely came home, who ran Green Garden?”

Blake tapped the bottom of his cue against the floor. “My uncles helped.”

“Helped your mother,” she said. “She ran the estate, am I correct?”

“My mother is an extraordinary woman.”

“So am I.” Cassie didn’t care if she sounded boastful.

“That may be why she likes you so much.”

“And why I like her,” she said.

Conversation had upset them both. On the next four turns, neither scored a point.

Cassie said, “I must stretch my legs.”

Through the rain sprinkled window, she watched a lawn full of robins cheep wildly as they feasted on water-logged worms.

Blake came up beside her. His nearness murdered her concentration. If he insisted on proving himself superior, she would learn to hate him.

“I am not at my best during thunderstorms,” she admitted.

“Ah,” he said. “Rain is the English soldier’s friend.”

She remembered the tradition. Before every great English victory, torrential rain fell. “Agincourt,” she said.

“Vitoria,” he replied.

She remembered Vitoria was the battle where the British and their allies pushed Napoleon’s Army out of Spain. “They say Nosey can make the clouds open.”

He took no offense at her mention of the Duke of Wellington’s nickname. “Indeed. In the Peninsula Campaign, the old man made sure we almost always held the high ground. The French, who always arrive late, march into battle with pennants flying. At every important battle, Nosey offered them slippery ground. At Vitoria . . .”

He turned silent. She put her arm through his.

With a catch in his throat, he said, “Too many memories.”

“The war is over,” she said. *Get this game over with. Then we should spend time apart for a while.*

Back at the billiards table, Cassie lined up her shot. She jerked the cue sharply. Astonished, she watched her ball carom off one rail, roll across the baize, and shove the red ball into a pocket. Three points.

Blake slipped the red ball out of the pocket and dropped it dead center on the table. “Go again.”

He could have dropped the ball in a more difficult spot. However, her ball was close to a rail. She shot her ball toward Blake's white one. Her ball skimmed past his but didn't touch it. Instead, her ball continued to roll until it tapped the red ball, which in turn rolled slowly toward the left side pocket.

A bolt of lightning struck near the house. The floor shook. The windows rattled. The red ball quivered on the rim of the pocket. Cassie held her breath. A second later, a thunderous boom split the air. Another vibration, and the red ball fell into the pocket. That made a total of six points.

Her score had reached twenty-one.

Blake stared at her.

To break the tension, she laughed. "I'm as surprised as you are."

"Supernatural intervention aside, you play well."

"As well as a man?"

"Better than most men. If I could sneak you into Brooks or Whites, we could clean up. Have you ever masqueraded as a man?"

She ignored his dig. "After the rain stops, I want to take a ride."

"A ride?"

"On my new horse."

A storm brewed in his forehead. His cheeks moved in and out. She wanted to watch him explode.

“Valor,” he said.

Cassie regretted their wager. The horse must have been with Blake through much of the war. But a bet was a bet.

She headed for the hall. Over her shoulder, she called, “And I always ride astride.”

Chapter 7

Valor

Blake could not let Cassie ride alone. Though he might enjoy watching his horse throw her, possibly breaking some unimportant bone, he would not put her in danger. Valor had been mistreated and was still wary of strangers. Blake spent months training him to obey commands.

While Cassie raced up the staircase to change into her riding habit, Blake jogged across the yard. Between the house and the stables, an ancient oak stood. The lightning strike had split the trunk diagonally, exposing the years of the tree's life. Cassie damaged a tree to win a game of billiards? Of course not. The deadly bolt was an act of God, who seemed to be on her side.

Blake instructed the groom to prepare the gray for him. As he outfitted Valor with his best saddle, he talked to his comrade in war. He didn't mention his foolish wager, just advised Valor to be careful. "If she gives you

some reasonable command, you must obey. But keep her safe.”

His horse might not understand his words, but Blake felt better for making the effort.

As fast as it had arrived, the storm cleared. Cloudless blue skies stretched from west to east. Soon after, Cassie joined him, her hair pushed up under a billed cap, her shapely legs in high boots and riding breeches. He led Valor out of his stall. Before Blake could warn her not to touch him, Cassie fondled his horse’s nose. Valor didn’t step back. As she scratched around his ears, the animal lowered his head.

“Cassie, there’s much you need to know about Valor. If you push him too hard, he will throw you. He doesn’t like to jump stone walls, though he enjoys leaping over fallen logs and swimming across water.”

“I will be careful until he knows me better.”

Gently, she stroked Valor’s mouth. Instead of nipping her fingers, his boon companion nuzzled her shoulder. Blake spent weeks getting Valor to let him touch his mouth. He should be proud his horse no longer feared strangers.

“Will you accompany us?” she asked.

“I insist.”

She threw him a quick smile. Did her look mean “thank you” or “I told you so?” She elbowed him aside and boosted herself into the saddle. Blake mounted the gray. They walked their horses to the bridle path. When they passed through the gate and into the meadow, Cassie gave Valor his head. Ears flat, hooves flying, his horse galloped across the open field.

Blake raced after her. His heart jumped around in his throat. No rider could stay aboard if Valor wanted to be alone. Coming closer, Blake heard her laughing. She was headed for the cliffs above Trent River Falls.

He shouted, “Pull up. Cliffs ahead.”

Valor might decide to throw her onto the rocks twenty feet below. Either Cassie couldn’t hear or she ignored him. At the edge of the precipice, Valor slowed and stopped. Blake spurred the gray to catch up. He would insist she ride cautiously until she and her newly acquired horse were better acquainted. As he neared, Valor started to pick his way down a steep slope to the right.

“Stop!” he cried. “Cassie, jump off. He won’t . . .” *I’ve never taken him this way*, he meant to finish, but he waited too long.

Carefully, Valor walked down the incline. Blake could see Cassie's hands on the reins. She talked in his ear, led him around rocks. Blake held his breath. He could do nothing to save her.

At a safe distance, he led the sure-footed gray behind them. As Cassie took control of his beloved horse, his pangs of jealousy mixed with waves of admiration.

When they reached the spit of beach below the falls, she led Valor to a pool left by the rain. As the horse gulped fresh water, she patted his neck. Then heads up for both of them, she walked him to the river's edge. She slapped his rump. Valor trotted to where the River Trent flowed into the Humber Estuary. Salt water splashed around them, wetting Valor's legs and flanks. His horse loved running through any kind of water.

Her cap had blown off somewhere in the meadow. With one hand, she pulled hairpins loose. In the wind, her long black hair streamed behind her. Infected with her excitement, Blake galloped to catch up. He had gloried to ride Valor here, though they used to come down the cliff where the slope was gentler.

When she reached a pile of rocks, Cassie

pulled in the reins and climbed down from his former horse. Blake watched her brush strands of hair away from her eyes. The most desirable woman he'd ever met overflowed with energy. Riding Valor, she was free. Soon, he would make her truly free. *If I really cared for her, I would let her go. If we marry, we will fight constantly for the upper hand.*

Out of breath, Cassie gasped, "Your horse is wonderful. So responsive. You trained him well."

Swinging down from the saddle, Blake stood beside her. "I never took him down that path from the cliffs."

"He didn't balk. I would have pulled back if he had."

"Remembering how skittish he was when I first owned him, perhaps I've treated him too gingerly."

"No one owns Valor," she said. "He belongs to himself."

How could she know so much about his horse? "I admit this much. In two of the manly arts, you are my equal. You have bested me at billiards, and you can ride a difficult horse as well as I do."

Her mouth and eyes turned down. What had he said wrong? He gave her the

compliment she craved.

“I don’t want to best you at anything,” she said. “I made an idle boast because you insulted my father.”

“You are amazing.”

She caressed Valor’s flank. He turned his head so she could pat his nose. His horse, now his former horse, was in love with Cassie.

“I don’t want to be amazing.”

“Then why did you challenge me?” he said. “Why do you upset me. Surprise me?” Other verbs swirled through his head. *Seduce me by merely leaning over a billiards table, invade my dreams, irritate me at the same time you tantalize?*

“What is the advantage of being better than men and not as good as women?” Cassie said. “I don’t want to be a man. I like being a woman. I just wish I had more talent for female ways.”

Women often talked in riddles. Blake had no idea what she meant. “There is nothing unfeminine about you.”

His gaze dropped to her boot clad toes, moved up to her shapely ankles, her round hips outlined in riding breeches, her slim waist and on up to her, may he say, generous breasts. By the time he reached her face, her

black eyes glowed like embers in a campfire.

“Don’t be rude.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“The truth. If I must spend time with you, we should be agreeable. Instead, we needle each other.” She closed her eyes for a moment.

“I’m sorry. I’m as difficult as you are.”

“Cassie, there is nothing wrong with you. The feminine skills you lack are mostly useless.”

“Not all of them. Self-control. Think before I act. Be polite. Don’t talk back. I’d like to have those qualities. But when faced with a choice, my worst instincts always win out.”

She looked so sad. He wanted to fold her into his arms and comfort her. Nothing more. To overcome the urge, he clenched his fists. If he reached for her, she would struggle to break free.

“You are forthright and honest,” he said. “Fight as you may, Cassie, you will never be like other women. Thank God, you won’t.”

He had no idea what her feelings were. She still looked sad, but she let a tiny smile escape.

~ ~ ~

When Cassie returned to the house, she

remembered what she'd asked earlier. "This morning, you said you'd made arrangements to loan my father the funds we need. I want to return home now to help my father prepare. When the repairs are well underway, I can come back here. Or you can visit River's Leap to inspect what you paid for."

He made a slight bow. "You don't need my permission. I'll pack Valor's belongings. Will you be riding him?"

"Valor?" For the moment, she forgot her winning wager. "Valor!"

"Your horse."

She clamped her hand over her mouth. "I can't take him with me."

"Why not?" He sounded insulted.

"How will I explain why I have him? No man willingly parts with his horse, especially one as fine as yours."

"Tell people the truth. You're good at bragging."

"If it kills me, I am going to be more feminine. A polite young woman does not win a horse in a game of billiards." She twisted her mouth into a half grin, half grimace. She'd seen other women use the same look with good results. "Could you keep him for me?"

He frowned.

“Please. As you say, he can be skittish. Valor would be upset with a move to a new location, especially if you didn’t come with him. I have enough problems without dealing with an unhappy horse.”

“You’re asking this as a kindness to me?”

She wished she could say “yes”, but she would be lying. “As a kindness to myself. We will both benefit.”

“As long as every time I ride him I remember he is no longer my horse.”

“And you remember how you lost him. Now I must change for luncheon, or have we missed the meal?”

As she headed up the staircase, the butler walked in. “Miss Valient. A Samuel Pennit wishes to see you.”

Over the butler’s shoulder, she saw her protector, confessor, and friend.

Though she knew he’d be embarrassed, she grabbed Samuel’s shoulders and shook him. “I am so happy to see you. You can take me home.”

“That’s what I come for. I’ve a message from yer pa.” From inside his wet jacket, he pulled out a letter and handed it to her.

She tore open the envelope and unfolded the sheet of paper.

My darling Cassie,

All our problems are solved, I trust, by the intervention of almighty God and possibly your Uncle Sydney. You remember Doctor Bainborough and Sir Jeffrey Spence were in my debt. I asked them for payment, but both were in sad straits. Yesterday, Sir Jeffrey arrived with cash in hand to repay not only his debt but that of his neighbor Dr. Bainborough. More surprising, this morning a messenger came with cash repayment from Thomas Thorntree. Thomas is a dear friend, but long ago I had abandoned hope of him coming up with the scratch. The total comes to five hundred and twenty-eight pounds. You can rest safe. Repairs to our property will begin immediately.

*With great affection, I remain, your father
James Valient.*

Too stunned to speak, Cassie turned the letter over and over. With little success, Uncle Sydney had pressed these men. He must have tried again with better results. She was more than surprised. Still, strange things did happen. People were never surprised when coincidences brought misfortune. They only doubted when happy results occurred.

Blake stood behind her and looked over her shoulder. He smelled of ocean air and

clean sweat. "What's wrong?"

The man lacked all decorum. She handed him the letter. "Read for yourself."

"I have no desire to read your personal mail."

"Yes, you do."

With a left-handed smirk, he snatched the paper from her hand. "Your father has the money he needs."

"You should be pleased."

His face had a hidden look, as if she'd caught him at some mischief. "Oh, because I won't have to loan him money. Well, this is good news. No loan. No need to ever see me again. Unless you want to."

From his tone, she couldn't tell if he was disappointed or relieved. "I'm sorry my family has inconvenienced you. And we do appreciate your offer of a loan."

She took the letter from his hands and slid it into her pocket. "In spite of my misgivings, I've enjoyed much of our time together. I don't know how you feel toward me. I have run you a merry chase. Often, I have been unkind."

With his cupped hand, he stroked her chin. "Some days, I think I'll die if I can't have you. Other days, I think I'd rather die than have to live with you."

She let her smile have full bloom. "Equally honest."

"Cassie, let's start over. As if we never met."

She wished she could. "No, Blake. We can't undo the past."

You're free. You can do whatever you want."

"I am."

Truly free. No encumbrances, no obligations, free to do what I want, free to choose a husband or not choose at all. This is too much to take in all at once.

He stared at her intently. "You can be the woman you've always been."

She bit her lips together. "Organize a kidnapping for ransom? Offer to run away with an outlaw? My behavior has been extreme."

"Crazy Cassie. Your daring is what I like most about you."

"I have been daring before. Not as outrageous as I was over the past few weeks, but often with bad results. I am determined to change my rash behavior and control my temper. When I do, you will no longer want me."

"You can't stop being who you are," he

said. "Get your worst instincts under control, but don't change the rest of you."

Blake hadn't given up. He continued his assault from another direction. Free of his control, she would never give him what he wanted.

"I will be whoever I please to be. You, sir, have nothing to say about it."

He grinned so wide she could see his molars. "Cassie, welcome back."

Chapter 8

Supper With Aunt Patience

A month later, Blake stood in the ballroom of Lord and Lady Stickney's London townhouse. He gripped the back of a settee. From above, twenty or more candelabra lit the elaborate room. The place abounded in gilt. He cut through the crush of guests and leaned against a few rare inches of unadorned wall. Ceiling to wainscot, almost every inch of the wallpaper sported tapestries, paintings, sconces or framed certificates. From the wainscot down was an array of tables, chairs, and settees. No one could possibly know this many people. Why would the Stickneys want strangers wandering about their house? The overdressed guests prattled gaily, throwing back their heads to laugh.

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his satin breeches. In the right pocket, he fingered the letter he'd received from his friend Stephen. Weeks ago, Blake made a breakneck ride to his friend's country estate near

Grimsby. Once there, he laid out Mother's plan to let "Cassie choose". Stephen agreed to visit Mother's friend Patience. The woman was to provide a list of the men who owed her brother money. Stephen also delivered Blake's donation for Cassie's belated "coming out" Season in London. These funds would buy dresses for all the dancing, dining, listening to music, poetry recitals and whatever else she must endure over the next few months. Stephen did as instructed, even bending the law to write contracts stating James had sold Blake his debt contracts.

After Cassie left Green Garden, Blake rode Valor, played billiards by himself and worked around the estate. Daily, he either missed Cassie or cursed himself for letting her get under his skin. Some days, he wanted to ride non-stop to find her. Other days, he wished she would move to a South Seas island.

Cassie was right. They were both too volatile. After much soul searching, he knew he shouldn't inflict his foul moods and rude behavior on her. Though recently, the only time he felt foul was after she left.

Blake mumbled under his breath, "I've always trusted Stephen. He is entirely unlike me. He is sensible, calm, and lovable. He has

helped me out of scrapes and offered me sound advice.”

Blake slid the letter out of his pocket. He unfolded the bottom and read the last line.

You must release me from our bargain. I can no longer be responsible for guarding Cassiopeia Valient against potential suitors.

He had come to rescue Stephen from Cassie. That wasn't the entire truth. In spite of his selfless resolve to protect her from himself, he missed her. He missed teasing her, playing with her, and trying to rile her. He missed looking at her.

First, he had to find his friend. He moved through the noisy crowd. He ignored people who tried to speak to him, mostly young ladies and their mothers. There he was. Blake watched Stephen dance a gavotte with Cassie. She lifted her foot and showed a flash of ankle. She smiled so hard her cheeks must hurt. In all their time together, she never smiled at him with such enthusiasm.

Making sure she couldn't see him, Blake waved his hands over his head. His friend frowned as he sashayed her out of view.

What should be his plan of attack? Blake couldn't cross the dance floor without a partner. Aha, Cassie's Aunt Patience

Willoughby stood chatting with other older women.

As Blake skirted the room, he called out, "Mrs. Willoughby."

She turned her head.

He dashed up to her. "Dance with me."

She offered her gloved hand. "How did you get in here? You couldn't have been invited."

"Over the garden wall. No dogs. Not even spikes. This place is ripe for robbery."

"Dear boy, I'm glad to see you. I wondered when you would appear."

"How is Cassie faring?"

"Ever since you sent Sir Stephen to hound James's creditors, she's been beside herself with happiness. The repairs at River's Leap are proceeding apace."

"You haven't told her of my efforts to help her family," he said. "You promised you wouldn't."

"I am a woman of my word."

"Is anyone romancing Cassie?"

"A few hardy souls. But she only has eyes for Stephen."

Blake maneuvered the woman toward his target. Coming closer, he grabbed Stephen by the shoulder, ushered him into Patience's

grasp, and took hold of Cassie.

“Changing partners,” Blake said.

“Stephen,” Cassie called.

“Everything is fine,” Stephen said as Patience whisked him away. “Good to see you Blake.”

While Cassie continued to protest, Blake gripped her waist. How many inches were required between partners? One could get thrown out of these to-dos for dancing too close.

“Except for fingertips,” she said, “there is no touching in a gavotte.”

He grabbed her right hand and raised it until their palms touched. “The only dance I know is the waltz.”

He glanced around. People were staring.

“And you have no talent for that,” she said. “Forget the box step. Just shuffle your feet.”

“Miss Valient, I have never seen you dressed so well. You clean up nicely.”

The deep green dress he'd paid for showed off her luscious bosom. The dip of the bodice displayed enough cleavage to entice but not overwhelm. Her arms were bare. Her dress draped close against her hips. His hands twitched thinking about caressing each body

part in turn.

"I could say the same for you. Blue cut-away coat, fawn-colored breeches. Rebel colors. How appropriate." She looked down. "And boots."

"These are my dancing boots," he said.

Her gaze moved to his face. Her lips were pressed in such a straight line they disappeared. "Dancing boots. Really? Please don't tread on my slippers."

"Sweet Cassie," he cooed. "I have never seen you this angry. And I am not even trying to irritate you."

"Why are you here?"

"Marriage is the primary purpose of these soirees. Have you convinced some young swain to overlook your difficult nature and lack of dowry to offer for your hand?"

Cassie straightened to her full height. "I am not here to capture a husband. I repeat, why are you here?"

"I brought Valor. He pines for you."

Her lips disappeared again. She did have a lovely chin though.

"And to see my old friend Stephen."

"He said he knew you at school."

The music stopped followed by smothered applause. People clapping with gloves on

didn't make much noise. Cassie dropped his left hand and pried his right hand from her hip.

At that moment, Stephen appeared without Mrs. Willoughby. At the sight of him, Cassie became calm. She smiled from every part of her face, forehead to chin. Even her ears looked happy.

Stephen took her elbow. "Midnight supper begins soon."

"One last dance," she purred.

A gangly youth who had barely grown into his clothes approached. "Miss Valient," he stammered. "You promised me a dance sometime."

Stephen said, "Now would be an excellent time."

As the fellow led her away, Cassie looked over her shoulder. "If you harm Stephen or insult him or embarrass him, I will . . ."

Blake was too far away to enjoy the rest of her threat.

When she disappeared among the dancers, Stephen said, "You've come in response to my letter."

"You were supposed to keep her from the clutches of other men."

"I have done so."

“So I could have my chance with her,” Blake said.

“At our last meeting just before I headed for London, you said you were well shunt of her. You lamented that the two of you did not suit.”

“Did I? Well then, I’ve come to save you from her clutches.”

“I need no saving,” Stephen said. “Just your permission to be free of our bargain.”

“So you can court her.”

He bowed slightly. “Cassie is astonishing. The most honest woman I’ve ever known.”

“Did she mention me to you? An opinion? An epithet?”

“At first she did. As time progresses, she speaks less and less of you.”

Afraid of the answer, Blake asked, “What did she say about me?”

“That you are infuriating. That you go out of your way to make her angry.”

“Of course I do. I love to watch her at full fury, eyes blazing, chest heaving. To hear outrageous phrases pour from her mouth when she is beside herself.”

“I have never seen her angry.”

“Why not?”

“Because I do not provoke her.”

“You don’t know what you’ve missed,” Blake insisted. “She seems fond of you. She smiles at you incessantly.” *I make her angry. Stephen makes her happy. I have a deep disadvantage.* “How do you make her smile?”

Stephen shook his head. “You have been out in the country far too long.”

Blake tried to sound sincere. “Instruct me in how to court a woman.”

“To make a woman smile, you need only smile at her.”

Thunderstruck, he said, “How simple. I will begin at once. Thank you.”

“You also don’t leer at any body part below her neck.”

“From neck to ankle are women’s most alluring parts. Why do they dress the way they do if . . .”

“If they don’t want to be ogled? I have no idea why.”

“What else must I do to win Cassie?” Blake no longer taunted his friend. He really needed to know more about courting.

Stephen spread his feet in a stance reminiscent of hand-to-hand combat. “You don’t embarrass her by changing partners in mid dance.”

“You have been very helpful. There must

be more rules.”

“Why should I help you court Cassie?”

“Because I have a prior claim.”

“You, sir, relinquished your claim. She is free, which she will remind you as often as she reminds me.”

Blake’s roundabout approach had failed. He went directly to the point. “What bribe can I offer to make you go away?”

Stephen smiled. His friend did have a charming smile. Blake could imagine a woman, even one as stubborn as Cassie, forced by its radiance to smile in return.

“I wonder the same about you,” Stephen said.

The rising strains of music signaled the tune’s end.

“Let us walk about,” Blake said. “I’ve lost sight of our prey.”

Stephen joined his tour of the outskirts of the room. “She is not an animal we are stalking.”

“She is my goal,” Blake said. “My prize.”

“Cassie is a woman. You have no idea how she thinks.”

If he acted more like Stephen, she might think him charming. To please her, would he have to change who he was?

Blake spied Patience's husband. "See you in a while. Sydney, wait up. I need to speak to you."

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At a small table in the dining room, Cassie sat beside Stephen. Since she met him two weeks ago, he had shown her kindness and sympathy. If he hadn't taken her under his wing that first night at Almacks, she might have booked passage on the next mail coach home. Sir Stephen Gilbert was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. Reddish locks with golden highlights waved naturally around his perfectly shaped head. He had large turquoise eyes and a smile bright enough to light a city block.

Aunt Patience walked through the doorway. Her escort was too tall to be Uncle Sydney. Cassie gripped the arms of her chair. Blake walked her aunt to their table. Cassie tried not to be obvious as she took deep breaths to calm herself. She had learned so much from Stephen. Regardless of how Blake was about to upset her, she would remain polite and charming.

He pulled out the chair opposite Cassie and guided Aunt Patience into the seat. Blake

sat between the two women.

Cassie asked her aunt, "What's become of Uncle Syd?"

"Sleeping," Blake responded. "I found a bedroom and tucked him in. We'll rouse him before we leave."

Aunt Patience swallowed a smile and seemed to chew on it.

Blake leaned toward Cassie, just close enough to make her feel weak. Not faint exactly, more like her limbs had turned to warm pudding. What in the world would cause such a reaction? After all, he was just another man.

"You and Stephen together. A couple," Blake gushed. "How romantic. My oldest friend chasing after my mother's best friend's niece. What a coincidence."

Cassie glanced at Stephen who glowered daggers at Blake. Stephen turned to her. She adored his beautiful eyes, his soft lips.

At that moment, he opened those lips. "Cassie, when Blake learned you were to have a Season, he asked me to come to London and be your escort."

Deep breathing couldn't cover this much disappointment. "I see."

Stephen covered her hand with his. "I

promised to introduce you to the right men, and save you from the wrong ones.”

She lowered her head. *Please stop. Don't deepen my pain. I don't want to hear the only reason you escort me to parties is because Blake asked you to.*

But he didn't stop. “A week ago, I wrote to Blake asking him to release me from my vow.”

“I don't need the details,” she murmured.

“He is here in response.” He glared at Blake. “I assume you have the letter I sent you.”

“Would you believe Valor ate it?”

Cassie joined the rest staring at Blake. “Valor wouldn't eat paper.”

“He would if I soaked it in raspberry jam. No, I didn't. I have your missive in my pocket.”

Stephen said, “Read my words aloud.”

Cassie's heart turned over. *Why are these men embarrassing me in public? Why doesn't Aunt Patience make them stop?*

Blake pulled the paper from his pocket. Then he shoved it back inside. “I'd rather not. Let's forget this. What's on the menu tonight?”

Suddenly, he jolted up in his chair, then glowered at Aunt Patience.

Cassie laughed. “Aunt Pat, where did you

pinch him?”

Her aunt raised her chin. “I’m not sure, but I enjoyed the experience.” She looked at Blake. “Either you read the letter out loud, or Cassie, Stephen, and I will wrestle you to the floor and take the cursed paper from you.”

Blake’s brow furrowed. “I can almost recite the words by heart. ‘Dear Friend, Thank you for allowing me to know this extraordinary woman. Cassie is beautiful. She is fascinating. She is surprising. She is intelligent.’” He looked at her. “There were several more ‘she is’ sentences, each more complimentary than the last.”

Cassie giggled. “I’d like to hear all of them.”

“‘She is my own true love,’” Blake continued. “‘There is no other woman like her on earth’.” He looked at his friend. “What did I leave out?”

Stephen launched his smile at Cassie. “A few more superlatives, but she has the essence of my adoration.”

She gripped Stephen’s hand. “I am so glad Blake sent you to me. My being tall, robust, and outspoken, I stand out like an Amazon among these delicate young ladies. You’ve helped me smooth my rough edges, made me

careful with my words. To think before I act. Gently, you have coaxed out my feminine nature. Those and many more are the reasons you are dear to me.”

Had she said those words to sting Blake? She meant everything she said to Stephen. He was the kind of man she should marry. He brought out the best in her.

Blake hogged the conversation again. “The reason I thought Stephen was a safe choice is because he is in mourning for his wife.”

Stephen shot to attention. “My wife didn’t die. Madeline ran off with another man.”

“You told me you had sworn off women forever.”

Transfixed, Cassie listened as the two men argued.

“I rushed into a wrongheaded marriage,” Stephen said. “Our annulment is final. I won’t make the same mistake again.” He patted Cassie’s hand. “My lovely gift from the heavens, you helped me let go of my anguish and forgive. You saved me from desperate loneliness.”

Along with being surprised and upset, Cassie was confused. “Thank you. I treasure every moment we’ve spent together.”

Waiters with the soup course headed their

way.

“This is splendid,” Aunt Patience said. “Two eligible men vying for your attention.”

Cassie grabbed Stephen’s right hand and Blake’s left. “Are either of you prepared to get down on one knee and propose?”

A chill swept the table. Both men stared at their empty plates.

“I didn’t think so,” she said. “Excellent. Because I am not ready to choose a husband. I want to discover the rest of me, the gentle as well as the strong. The supportive as well as the competitive. I like you both for different reasons.”

Aunt Patience clapped her ungloved hands together in what amounted to a cheer. “Two men, boon companions since they were lads, endangering their friendship to gain your attention. Cassie, you may be the talk of the Season.” Her aunt turned her head back and forth between the two men. “You must schedule your visits with Cassie through me. I don’t want any blood spilled in my foyer.”

Chapter 9

Hyde Park in Disguise

Early the next afternoon, Cassie sat on her aunt and uncle's rear verandah. Soft green moss grew between the flagstones. The roof sheltered her from the sun. A well-bred lady in search of a titled husband allowed no freckles, or worse, suntan to mar her skin. The lilacs bloomed in purple and blue splendor. Their distinctive scent always reminded her of grape juice. Beneath the lilacs, tulips competed for sunlight. Deeper in the yard, two dogwood trees scattered their blossoms on the short grass. Stephen sat beside her at the wrought iron table. They had just finished a cold meat salad lunch.

For all her desire to be a woman of the world, Cassie longed for the green fields and forests of Nottinghamshire. Mostly, she missed her father and sisters. London was exciting, but traffic clogged the streets, and coal smoke filled the air. Too many people were going too many places in too great a hurry.

As always, Stephen made her feel feminine and appreciated. Part of their time today, they had looked into each other's eyes, smiled and laughed at nothing.

At last night's midnight supper, Blake and Stephen discussed, loud enough for nearby tables to hear, who would visit her today and at what times. Aunt Patience settled the argument. Stephen would arrive at eleven in the morning, Blake at two in the afternoon. Each man was allowed two hours.

Stephen stood up. "My time is finished, dear one."

"Tomorrow evening is Lady Belvidere's rout," she reminded him.

"May I come early? Perhaps for late tea?"

"If Aunt Pat approves."

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. She ran her fingers over his smooth shaved jaw. She adored his sweet visage. Last night, she learned she had helped mend his heart after his broken marriage.

"Blake!" Aunt Patience cried.

Her aunt sat near the door into the back parlor. Cassie couldn't tell if her cry was happy or angry. Mayhap some of each.

Stephen shook his friend's hand. "I was just leaving." What a gentleman.

She should walk Stephen to the front door, but she too was busy staring at Blake.

Aunt Pat got to her feet. "You're early, Blake, so your two hours starts now. Have you eaten?"

Probably trying to look contrite, he hung his head. Then he glanced up with a full-face grin.

"I'll have cook bring you a plate." When Blake sat down, Aunt Pat twisted his ear. "Behave, or I shall write your mother."

"Yes, ma'am."

Cassie closed her eyes. Not for one minute would she let Blake ruffle her composure. When she opened her eyes, her resolve disappeared. Again, that melting sensation engulfed her; weak knees, bubbles in her stomach, tingles everywhere. Oh, the tingles. Try as she might, she could not control these disturbing emotions.

She thought of clearing her throat, but Blake would notice. "Lord Rayneford."

All the words of greeting she could think of were inappropriate. Such as, "Did you sleep well? What mischief are you planning for today?" and most definitely not "Good to see you." Instead, she waited for him to speak.

"You know I have no talent for small talk,"

he began. "When I am around you, I behave badly."

"You blame me for your ill-mannered actions?" She glanced at her hands. They should be folded in her lap. Instead, her fingers twitched along the hem of her napkin.

"Of course not," he said. "Before I met you, I was just as obnoxious as I am now." He turned his head sideways and looked up with those intense blue eyes. "Are you all right?"

Near him, she never felt right. Even when he stood half a room away, his nearness bothered her.

"I am digesting my lunch," she said.

Aunt Patience returned, the serving girl in tow. The girl placed a tray laden with roast beef, slabs of thick bread, slices of cheese plus condiments and a stein of ale. Her aunt sat down next to Blake, almost closer than was proper.

Cassie watched him construct a sandwich. He smeared on mustard and chomped off a mouthful. As he chewed, he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

After he swallowed, he said, "I apologize to both of you for my boorish behavior last night. Especially you, Cassie. I embarrassed you. I made you angry. I baited Stephen who

is too much the gentleman to rise to my taunts. I acted worse than any country bumpkin.”

She savored his apology. Trying to be wise, Cassie said nothing.

“I’ve been out of society too long,” he said. Did she detect a pout? “I no longer know how to act.”

She frowned her disapproval.

This time, his mouth drooped in genuine contrition. “You’re right. I do know the proper way to act in society. Any fool would know I shouldn’t have done or said the things I did. I cannot blame drink for I had none.”

Aunt Patience patted his hand. “Thank you, Blake. I know your mother raised you properly. You’ve come to visit Cassie. I’ll sit over here.” She walked to a chair farther away than during Stephen’s call. “You two can chat in private. Remember, I can see everything you do.”

Is she taking sides? Because Grace is her friend, does my aunt favor Blake’s courtship over Stephen’s?

Her awkward suitor gulped down a half stein of ale. “I’ve moved in with my sister Lydia. She lives just a few blocks from here. This morning, I received invitations to every

event planned for the next month. Lord and Lady Thornton's dinner party, the Four in Hand Club picnic. Even Lady Belvidere's rout."

For the next few weeks, Cassie would be forced to meet him in public almost every night. Stephen, her salvation, would accompany her to all these parties.

She finally spoke. "So you no longer have to scale garden walls."

"No matter how odious my actions, these people feel duty bound to invite me. I'm one of the few eligible lords available this season. Bottom of the barrel, you know. I'm too old. I reek of a bad reputation, and my estate is only average in size."

He took two large bites before he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Did the serving maid overlook the serviette? No, the linen square lay beside his plate. Cassie waited for his burp, but none came.

"You don't like being a nobleman, do you?"

He used his forefinger to pick food from his back molars. "My father didn't either. King George dubbed him a baron for his service at the Battle of Trafalgar. You remember, when we blew Napoleon's navy to pieces, and the frogs never rebuilt."

His rough eating habits made her want to put her elbows on the glass top table, rest her chin in her palms, and watch him enjoy his meal. But she couldn't. Proper young ladies weren't allowed such freedom.

"What a great honor for your father."

"We were proud of him," Blake said. "But we all believed he received a life peerage. When he died, the title should have ended. No land was attached. Something went amiss, and the title became hereditary. I took on the responsibilities. Sat in on House of Lords sessions. That's why I'm required to produce a male heir."

Cassie sipped her tea. The reluctant lord. How many men would give all they had to be in his position?

"Stephen was the perfect choice to accompany you." He still talked while he chewed. "He is a gentleman who never loses his composure. He has cosseted and coddled and comforted and cared for you."

"Blake, your sarcasm is showing. However, every word you just said is true."

"Not sarcasm. I do admire the man. I have since I first met him. I could attend every one of these balls and whatevers. At each one, I would make a fool of myself and infuriate you.

And you would like me less than you do now. I want to propose a bargain. If I refuse every invitation and let you enjoy yourself at every ball, dinner party, luncheon, Ascot race, musical evening and poetry reading that Stephen wants to escort you to . . .”

What is he up to now?

“Would you let me visit you afternoons here at the Willoughbys? Tea in the parlor, a walk in the garden, carriage rides along the Avenues, a dash around Hyde Park, mayhap a day trip to the country.”

In some ways, Blake knew her better than Stephen did. He had guessed she missed being outdoors; riding, walking, breathing fresh air.

“Aunt Patience would have to chaperone. Between your afternoons and Stephen’s evenings, you will command most of her free time.”

Aunt Pat called out, “My darling boy, I will be delighted. We all need more sunshine.”

“I have no choice, then?” Cassie asked.

“Choice? Yes, you do. Wait. This seemed like such a good plan, but I have not offered enough. How’s this? If you tell me you love Stephen and you intend to marry him, I will leave you in peace. He is the finest man I’ve ever known. He deserves happiness after what

he's been through." Blake dropped the crust of his sandwich and looked into her eyes. "Do you love him?"

"Sir, you presume too much."

"Cassie." He spoke too softly for her aunt to hear. "Except for our adventure in Sherwood Forest, we have been honest with each other. Give me a good reason, and I will leave London today and return to Green Garden."

She tried to fold her hands, but her fingers had forgotten how to mesh. Loose ones kept escaping. She made fists instead. With a quick bite to her lower lip, hoping a little pain would bring her back to her senses, she looked into his eyes. She didn't want to lie to him, but she couldn't let him control her.

"I'm not in love with either one of you."

He didn't smile. He didn't gloat. He didn't grab her. Blake polished off the rest of his sandwich, stuffed some olives and pickles in his mouth, and washed them down with a stein-emptying gulp of ale. This time he wiped his crumb covered lips on his napkin.

"When can we start?" he asked.

"Did you ride Valor here today?" she said.

"Of course. The poor beast is besotted with you."

“Don’t jest about that noble steed.”

“Since the day you rode him, he has not been the same. Would you ride him? He would be so pleased.”

She ground her teeth. “You may ride out with us.”

He jumped to his feet. “You have a horse I can ride?”

“I’m sure my uncle has something in the stable.”

He bowed his acceptance, but she heard him mutter, “No doubt some animal so short legged my feet will drag the pavement.”

Cassie slipped past him and headed for the parlor door. “While you talk to the groom, I will change into my riding habit.”

On a jaunt through nearby Hyde Park, she could test her self-control.

“The groom. Yes. I will have him fit Valor with a sidesaddle.”

Fury flamed through her. She turned on him.

He grinned. “Even you, Miss Valient, cannot get away with riding astride in London.”

But she could and she did.

~ ~ ~

Perched on an English saddle, Cassie trotted Valor down alleys and less traveled side streets. Her hair tucked under a billed cap, she wore her riding breeches and a leather jacket. She and Valor might enjoy a good gallop, but city streets were too crowded to do so. Blake made sure he rode the largest horse in the Willoughby stable. Aunt Patience followed them in an open carriage.

Near the entrance to the Park, newsboys hawked their afternoon editions.

“Allies vow to keep fighting until they kill Napoleon,” one shouted. He looked up at Blake. “Paper, sire?”

He handed the boy a coin, then bought different editions from several boys.

They rode into the park by a side gate. Blake sped toward the far side. Cassie had her chance for a short gallop. He dismounted near the Deer Pond. Ancient walnut trees shaded the secluded spot. Here the land was higher and had a view of the Serpentine River.

By the time she caught up, Blake was sprawled under a tree reading the news about Napoleon’s invasion plans. He had the other papers secured under a stone. She dismounted and led Valor to a shady spot near the pond. Removing her gloves, she brushed her hand

over the fallen leaves beside Blake. They were dry enough to sit on. He handed her his newspaper and pulled the next one from the pile.

Cassie read what he gave her. When they had perused all four newspapers, she said, "If the Little Corporal would rule his country and leave the rest of Europe alone, the Allies might let him keep the French throne."

Blake folded the last paper. "He thinks he should be an Emperor. The word means you rule more than one country. Napoleon always wanted to conquer Europe. For a time, his army also controlled Egypt and the Holy Land."

"If he starts another war, we will settle him swiftly." Cassie needed to believe the war that lasted seventeen years was not about to begin again. "During his reign, he destroyed France's economy, killed thousands of young men, and wounded many more. For the last several years, all the young Frenchmen who could flee the country did so. Bonaparte shrank his country's borders and let foreign armies invade the capital. Why the French restored him as Emperor is beyond belief."

Blake sneered. "They're French. If he pays them enough, veterans will answer his call to

arms.”

The French made great food, beautiful clothes, fine art, and divine furniture, but had no sense when it came to politics. “The Allies have agreed not to lay down their arms until they kill him,” she said. “But that’s not the same as declaring war.”

Leaning back against a tree, Blake stared into the grove. She couldn’t read his face. Was he contemplating the future or remembering the past?

“You’re out of the Army for good, aren’t you?” she said.

Blake’s jaw ground. “A year and a half now.”

Cassie wanted to give him a hug or at least pat his arm, but he looked forbidding.

“Do you miss being in the Army?”

“You mean doing my patriotic duty as an Englishman? Make sure I get wounded. A serious wound. Something to brag about.”

She shivered thinking of her ill-chosen words that day in Sherwood Forest. “When I thought you were a highwayman, my remarks were the stupidest, most unkind I have ever spoken. The moment they left my mouth, I wanted to take them back.”

“You believed them to be true.”

This was the second time he'd mentioned his war experiences. If she were ever to understand him, she needed to know more.

"Your mother said other officers criticized you for surviving battles unharmed. As you corrected me, I know nothing about what war is really like." Memories of destruction, death, and suffering must bedevil every soldier who survived. "I regret everything I said to you, especially about you being a coward because you were never wounded."

He stared straight ahead.

He had been a coward? Impossible. "I know you did not shirk your duty."

He still stared at the trees. "I never suffered a wound. Oh, scrapes and scratches, bumps and bruises, but nothing inflicted by a bullet or a bayonet."

He sounded unhappy at the memory.

"You did what you were supposed to do," she said.

"When I lead men into battle, I survey the situation and choose the best plan of attack. The less fighting needed, the fewer casualties we have, and the more prisoners we take."

French prisoners could be traded for English prisoners. Both sides would parole any captive who promised to return home and

never fight again.

His achievements reflected his strategic genius. “I see. Others were jealous of your success. I’m sure you were popular with your men.”

He finally looked at her. “The Duke asked me to instruct other officers on my methods. That’s when the taunts started. Some said I fought first to save myself and then my men.”

Blake grabbed up the papers and jumped to his feet. He stuffed them into his horse’s saddlebag.

Cautious of his mood, Cassie put her arm through his. Any other time, her gesture would be an invitation for a kiss. But Blake didn’t lean in, and she didn’t turn her lips toward his.

“We came to enjoy the park,” he said. “Let us talk of foolish things before we must talk of deadly ones.”

She wondered if he quoted a line of poetry. The horses moved about, sniffing each other but not hostile. Cassie pulled off her cap and stuffed it into her pocket. She patted her neck to be sure the bun still held.

She and Blake walked the horses to the pond to let them drink. When Valor raised his head, she stroked his nose. She knew this

horse hadn't been pining for her, but she did miss him. What a wonderful beast. He was a warhorse; sure footed, aggressive, brave beyond what nature required. Blake had trained him to perfection.

His huge eyes fixed on hers, Valor nodded his head. She ran her fingers under his bridle and scratched behind his ears. She gave his chest a rub. If horses could smile, Valor would be grinning.

Blake stood next to her. His breath warmed her ear. "How do you get him to respond?"

"You want my secret?"

"I do."

"You must act like a woman."

"I beg your pardon."

She laughed. "Women have quieter voices than men. We don't yell. Our hands are softer, and we smell better. Most women have so little experience with horses they act afraid. A horse uses that fear to his advantage. Some women overcome their fear by whipping the animal. No horse likes that."

Valor nuzzled her. Cassie returned to petting his head and stroking his ears.

"Cooing and patting," Blake said. "Valor likes that."

“When no one is watching, you could coo and pat.”

“Sometimes I do. I know how you came by your knowledge.”

“Animal husbandry,” she replied. Since Blake seemed eager to learn, she continued. “Women like the same treatment. Soft words. Gentle caresses. Kindness.”

From behind her, he reached his arms around her shoulders. As she stroked Valor, he laid his hands over hers. She should make him stop, but she didn’t want to. Blake moved his hands to Cassie’s stomach. His fingers tiptoed across her waist. Though he barely touched her blouse, he stirred every nerve in her body into languid ecstasy.

He whispered, “I should treat you as I do my horse?”

“If you wish, sire.” She started to turn into his arms. *We should try another kiss. Just a little one.*

She stopped and stared.

“What do you see?” Blake asked.

“That young man is watching us,” she said. “I’ve seen him outside Aunt Pat’s house.”

Blake let go of her. “I saw him walking behind the newsboys. That’s not a boy. She’s a girl dressed like one. Stay here.”

As the boy or girl slunk behind a tree,
Blake disappeared into the woods.

Chapter 10

Upstairs and Down

Careful not to rustle the undergrowth, Blake came up behind the girl. She didn't scream when he threw his arm around her neck. Instead, she elbowed him in the ribs. He dodged the worst of her blow and let her run past. With his longer legs, he caught up and grabbed her shoulders. Without a struggle, she stopped and dug in her heels.

Cassie ran to join them. Except for Aunt Patience's carriage on the path, the trees hid them from curious park patrons. Blake twisted the girl around to face him. He pulled off her cap. She was in her mid-teens. Her short brown hair had a hint of red, and her eyes shot daggers. A second later when she lunged at his hand, Blake learned she had all her teeth.

"Enough," he ordered. "I can have you arrested. Have you spent time in the Women's Gaol? The cells are nicer than the men's but not by much. Why are you following my

lady?"

The defiant girl pouted her chin. With his left hand, Blake squeezed her wrists together behind her back. As he angled to get his other arm around her neck, she wriggled and made a low shriek.

Cassie touched the girl's shoulder. "We mean you no harm. Sir, take your arm from her neck so she can speak."

Blake released her throat but not her wrists.

Cassie said, "Why are you following me?"

"I've done none such."

"Do you have business in this neighborhood? Do you work in one of the houses? I've seen you three times. On each occasion, you watched me."

"You're a fine lady," the girl said. "I hope to be one someday."

Cassie shook her head. "I'm not all that fine. There are better bred and better dressed women you could study. Women so wrapped up in their affairs they wouldn't notice you. This man means to carry out his threat. Tell the truth, or he will have you arrested."

"I've done nothin'," she cried. "You come runnin' after me, grabbin' me. Such is against the law."

“One more chance to tell the truth,” Blake said. “Then I make up a story which will keep you in gaol for months.”

Cassie gave him a look that said, “Let her go.” Her female instincts had helped her turn Valor into a lap dog. She was a better horsewoman than he dreamed possible. Perhaps her instincts could tame this girl.

Cassie said, “This man is my protector. I hired him to keep me safe.” She stepped closer. Her face was only inches from the girl’s. “He stopped me from being kidnapped.”

The girl shuddered. “You weren’t kidnapped.”

Cassie’s eyes narrowed. “Attempted kidnapping for ransom.”

The girl turned sad-eyed. “I need some money. For me pa.”

Blake released the girl’s hands, but he stayed near enough to stop her from attacking Cassie or running away. “Why did you pick this woman to beg from?”

The girl turned to him. When she grew up, she would be pretty. “She knows why.”

Cassie opened her reticule. She drew out a bill and a handful of coins. The girl accepted the money as if she’d earned it.

After she counted the amount, the girl

said, "This ain't near enough."

"This is more than you deserve," Blake said.

Cassie looked at him. "Kind sir, empty your purse."

"I will not!"

Aunt Patience's carriage moved closer. Soon she would walk over and ask what the stir was about. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out several bills. He didn't count them, just handed them to the girl.

His eyes level with hers, he blew a breath on her nose. "Make sure your father knows this is all you will get from us. Run as fast as you can out of the park and back to your den. If we see you again, it will be gaol for you and the noose for your pa."

The girl folded the money tight in her hand and ran like she was chased by a rabid dog.

He watched her flit among the trees as she raced to the gate. "Do you suppose this girl is Dangerous Dan's daughter?"

Cassie shrugged.

"You promised the man fifty pounds. He believes you owe him payment."

"He didn't kidnap me. You sort of did."

"How exactly did you arrange your

kidnapping? How many other underworld characters know about your scatterbrained plan?" Scatterbrained sounded harsh, but Cassie deserved his stern words.

"Dan Durgan held up my Aunt Patience and some of her friends. When she came to visit at River's Leap, she raved about his well-bred manners. He wouldn't take any jewelry of sentimental value. He treated them with great respect. From other accounts, I knew he sometimes dabbled in kidnapping, always for small amounts of money."

"Your Aunt Patience approved your scheme?" he said.

"She knew nothing about it. Among the servants and people I knew in Nottingham, I retold her story, hoping to find someone who could contact the Gentleman Bandit. Samuel knew I wouldn't give up. He found someone who worked with Mr. Durgan."

"Who did you meet with? And where and when?"

"You don't need the specifics," she said.

"The money we gave that girl won't satisfy her outlaw father. We need to prepare for when he comes in person." Cassie didn't seem defiant. She seemed more like ashamed. "I can't protect you if I don't know who the

villains are,” he said.

“You don’t have to protect me. Well, after talking to Mr. Durgan’s daughter, I guess you do. Thank you. I met a man one sunny afternoon outside a bakery shop in Nottingham. The ruffian pulled me into an alley. When I threatened him with a knife, he let loose of me.”

He could have killed her, though the man had no reason to.

“Was Samuel with you?”

“No. I left earlier than we planned, so he couldn’t stop me.”

Blake sighed. How had Cassie lived this long without being robbed, assaulted, beaten, or killed? “You explained your plan to him?”

“We discussed several possibilities. He suggested kidnapping for ransom.”

“And you agreed.”

“Most of my life and especially since my mother died, I have been self-reliant. That day, I let desperation turn me rash and unthinking. Now I am trying to control my behavior. In spite of my efforts, you encourage me to do outrageous things. Organizing my own kidnapping is the main reason you were attracted to me. So don’t complain if I fall under your spell and throw myself into new

troubles.”

He half smiled. “I want you to be your sweet exciting self, but I don’t want you to get hurt.”

~ ~ ~

Over the next two weeks, Cassie didn’t see the girl again. Almost every evening, Stephen arrived in his carriage to escort her to a ball, a rout, a dinner party, a musical evening or a poetry recital. Blake took her riding or walking or on picnics in the Willoughby’s backyard. She liked both her suitors. Though they appeared to be different, each had a sense of adventure. Stephen wasn’t competitive, but Blake always kept score.

That afternoon, Cassie, Blake, and Aunt Patience had joined a tour of the back gardens of Hanover Square’s finest homes. Roses bloomed. Irises, hyacinths, and rhododendrons flowered under blossom-laden apple and peach trees. Some verandahs displayed pots of hothouse orchids. Cassie wished she could have such an elaborate garden. Blake paid their admission, a donation to a society that found homes for London’s abandoned orphans.

When they returned to the Willoughby’s house, Aunt Patience hurried around to the

backyard with Blake in tow. Between them, they carried four large boxes filled with seedlings.

Cassie entered by the front door. In the parlor, she stripped off her lace gloves, plopped down in a wingback chair, and lifted her feet onto an ottoman. Soon, Blake returned with two glasses of lemonade. As he headed for the settee, she heard laughter coming from the stairway. A moment later, Blake's mother came into the room. Right behind was Cassie's father.

Their parents greeted Blake and Cassie with smiles, though Grace looked a bit embarrassed.

"Mother," Blake said. Then he said nothing more.

"I know this is a surprise," Grace said. "Let me tell you what happened."

Cassie assessed the scene. Her father and Blake's mother had come down from the second floor where all the rooms had beds. Blake's face brimmed with questions. His mother appeared eager to stop him from asking any of them.

"Oh, Cassie," she cried. "So good to see you again."

Cassie started to get up, but Grace waved

for her to stay seated.

Her father took Grace's hand and led her to the loveseat.

Grace said, "Blake, sit down."

He settled on an undersized chair next to Cassie's wingback. What with the fireplace, a tall pendulum clock and several bookcases, the small front parlor was short on seating.

His mother began, "I was travelling to London for the Birthday Party."

"Birthday party?" Blake asked.

"Your niece Elizabeth will soon be five years old."

"In a few weeks," he reminded her.

"Well yes. Blake dear, I was curious as to how you and Cassie are getting along. Your letter said you had difficulty fitting in with the *ton*."

Cassie stifled a titter.

"And," Grace continued, "I wondered how Cassie is enjoying her Season. On my way to London, I stopped at River's Leap to share your letter with James." She looked at her companion. They smiled at each other like young lovers. "He shared the two letters he'd received from Cassie. She mentioned Stephen Gilbert has become her escort." She favored her son with the hint of a frown. "I knew you

were also courting her. Well, James and I had to see for ourselves. So after a night's rest, James packed his belongings, and we headed for Mayfair. I had written Lydia to expect me for the party, though not this soon. I didn't write Patience since we traveled faster than the mail coach."

For a short time, silence consumed the parlor. Cassie had a few questions. Blake seemed to have a mouth full of comments. Neither was brave enough to utter a word.

Grace kept talking. "We arrived this morning. I dropped James here and moved in with Lydia. Then I returned, and we've spent the afternoon together. Indoors and out."

Unchaperoned. Does a woman in her fifties need someone to watch over her? My father is the soul of discretion.

At that moment, Aunt Patience swooped in from the kitchen. "James," she cried. He rose to his feet, and the siblings embraced. "When did you arrive?"

"A few hours ago," Grace said.

Aunt Pat's mouth opened and closed twice before any words came out. "Grace, oh my goodness. The two of you came together?"

Blake's mother repeated her story about the letters and staying overnight and travelling

a hundred and thirty miles from River's Leap, which meant for at least three nights they stayed in some sort of lodging.

The parlor had run out of seats, so Blake carried in a comfortable chair from the dining room.

Aunt Patience sat "on the edge of her seat". "I remember when you two met. That summer when Jamie came home from college, I introduced him to my new best friend, Grace Beaulieu, who was visiting our neighbor. We had such fun together. Riding in Sherwood Forest, boating on the Trent, village dances, walks in the moonlight."

"Not just the three of us," Grace corrected.

Aunt Patience smiled. "And Sydney. Jamie brought him home from Cambridge to meet me. Syd was such a sweet, shy man. I liked him immediately. Grace, remember you and I planned to have a double wedding."

A double wedding? When was this? Why has no one ever told me Blake's mother and my father were once sweethearts?

"We were too young of course," Aunt Pat said. "But we pledged ourselves to one another. Syd and I, you and . . ." She paused. "And Jamie. Look at the two of you now. Just like today was yesterday."

Blake spoke up. "You've know each other forty years or so. Much has happened in that time."

Cassie wanted to pinch him before he said something he would regret.

"Yes," Grace said. "Marriages for both of us. And both of us widowed. Children, too." She glanced at the pendulum clock. "Does that read four o'clock? Gracious me, I must get back to Lydia's. I promised to help her with something." She sprang to her feet.

Cassie's father rose. "I will accompany you to Lydia's and then return here."

"You must stay for dinner," Grace said. "I want Lydia to get to know you."

Before any of the three observers could speak, the spritely oldsters fled through the front door. Out the window, Cassie watched them walk away holding hands. They almost skipped down the sidewalk.

Breaking the silence, Aunt Patience said, "Well, wasn't that something."

Blake said. "What is going on between my mother and your brother?"

"You know as much as I do." Aunt Patience glanced at Blake. "Do you know something I don't?"

"I left Lydia's early this morning," he said.

“Stephen has moved in with me there. Lydia did not expect Mother to arrive this week.”

Aunt Patience patted his knee. “Dear boy, those two belong together. They have since they first met. I don’t know why they reunited, but their friendship is the best thing for both of them. Widowed, lonely, their children grown up and leaving home.”

“I have not left home,” Blake insisted.

“You should. Unmarried at your age, you limit your mother’s options. I don’t mean to interfere. This is such a surprise. I am exhausted from walking in the fresh air. I shall go upstairs and take a nap. Blake, stay for tea. I’ll trust you to behave yourself. In an hour or so, Sydney will be home from his office.”

Her aunt headed for the stairs.

Those stairs lead to bedrooms. Of course, one could spend time in a room with a bed and not do anything improper.

Blake paced. Cassie pulled him down beside her on the loveseat their parents recently vacated. He leaned his elbows on his knees and covered his face in his hands.

“We’re both surprised,” she said. “Let this sink in before you do anything rash.”

“I knew they were friends, but they act like they’re courting.”

“They’ve renewed an old friendship.”

“Upstairs? What’s up there?” he demanded.

“There’s a sunroom in the attic. On the second floor are several bedrooms. Patience and Sydney have five children.”

“Why don’t their children live here?”

“The oldest three are married. One son is at Oxford. Their youngest son is off in Norway on a group excursion to the fjords.”

“No other rooms like a library or a sewing room or a music room?”

“For Mayfair, this is a small house. Patience and Sydney have a summer home in Bath. But you don’t really care how many bedrooms they have.”

“I care about your father’s intentions toward my mother.”

Here was the problem. Cassie had told him all her father’s faults. Blake was probably reviewing them one by one in his head.

“Grace seems in charge,” she said. “She visited him. She invited him to London. She went upstairs to his bedroom.”

“My mother is a saint. She is beyond reproach.”

“I am not reproaching her,” Cassie said. “I know my father. He is a kind and loving man.

But he doesn't make things happen. Things happen to him."

Blake's voice rose. "My mother is not a 'thing'. With a snap of her fingers, she drops by and rekindles a forty-year-old romance."

"They've been in contact for several years."

"What do you mean?"

Cassie bit her lip. How much should she tell him? "When my mother died, Grace sent my father a condolence letter. I don't know what she wrote, but it came in a thick envelope. It must have been several pages. He sent a reply. For years, they've sent letters back and forth. My mother died five years ago. Influenza took her a few weeks after my little brother Orion died from the same illness."

"I'm sorry," Blake said. "I guess I forgot that."

"From birth, Orion had breathing problems. His last year, my mother wore herself out taking care of him. My father is an emotional man. He can't hide his feelings. When my mother and my brother died, he fell apart, crying, walking around in a daze. We all grieved for Orion, but Mother had been the center of our family. You don't need to know all of this."

“My father was still alive when this correspondence began.”

“Your father wasn’t home much. And then he died.”

Blake sat back into the cushions. “Three years ago, his ship broke up on the rocks off New England. Most of the crew escaped in lifeboats. The ship sank before he could be rescued. Damn Americans making war in the middle of our battle with Napoleon.”

Those damn Americans beat the greatest army and navy in the world. Twice. “About a year after your father died, Grace came to visit at River’s Leap. She stayed a few days.”

“How did your father act toward her? How did she act?”

“They were glad to see each other. I was delighted to see my father return to his old self. Riding out with her, talking late into the night. A lot of smiling. But they weren’t visiting each other’s bedrooms.”

“Because he had a house full of daughters.”

Though she didn’t think he intended to, Blake was irritating her. Cassie said, “Earlier this year, Grace again came to visit. She saw the damage done by the flooding. I got to know her. She told me about you.”

“Your father insisted you marry me.”

“He did not. He said I might enjoy a visit to Green Garden. The two of us might suit. I’m not marriage material, you know. Headstrong, too tall, no dowry. He cares about my future.”

“Marriage to me would solve his financial problems.” Blake jumped to his feet. “When they were younger, he wasn’t good enough for her. Their differences in class, in wealth.”

She thought about confronting him toe to toe, but she was still trying to be ladylike. “Which must be why her family insisted she marry your father.”

“Your father can’t run an estate without help from you or his wife. He lends money to people who must be threatened before they repay him. He grieves overlong. Since you won’t marry me . . .”

“You haven’t offered,” she corrected.

“He takes up with my mother. She can solve all his money problems.”

He’d said too much. On her feet, Cassie stood so close to Blake he had to look at her. “Don’t you dare malign my father. He has done nothing wrong. Your mother is pursuing him. And he’s making her happy.”

“How would you feel if my father was romancing your mother?”

Cassie understood Blake wanted to protect his mother. “I don’t know your mother well. But I know my father. He is the kindest, most generous, maybe too generous, most loving man you will ever find. Everyone likes him. He goes out of his way to make people happy. He brings joy to everyone.” Tears clogged her throat.

“My mother is a lady of the Realm,” Blake stormed. “Your father isn’t even knighted.”

“Oh, and having a title is soooo important.” Her father was wonderful, but he wasn’t perfect.

Blake almost knocked her aside. “I’m leaving now. I have to get back to Lydia’s so I can chaperone the elderly lovebirds. Should I visit you tomorrow?”

Aunt Patience had a written schedule of Cassie’s engagements. When she got over being furious, she would look at tomorrow’s list.

As she climbed those same stairs, Cassie called out, “Consult your date book.”

Chapter 11

George Gordon

Cassie forgave Blake for his unkind remarks about her father. He continued to arrive early for every scheduled visit. He'd start to say something about his mother or her father and then stop. This made conversation difficult. Sometimes he left earlier than he needed to. Between Blake arriving early and Stephen keeping her out late, Cassie didn't get enough sleep. Late afternoons, she nodded off. When she had trouble keeping her eyes open, she took a nap.

That evening, she and Stephen were to attend the Regent's Ball. The Prince Regent, who would become George IV as soon as his father died, hosted balls at his London residence. She had heard awful things about Prinny's circle of friends; their drunken parties and their profligate ways with women, money, and food.

Stephen's carriage entered the line leading to Carlton House. Under the portico, she let

him help her onto the driveway. He escorted her up the marble stairs and through mammoth doors into the block long mansion. Inside, the rooms blazed with candelabra. Cassie gawked at the French furniture and Oriental carpets. Paintings by masters old and new, intricate tapestries and assorted *objet d'art* covered the twenty-foot-high walls.

As they entered the Grand Ballroom, Stephen said, "I must warn you. Prinny wants to meet you."

Her enthusiasm faded. "He wants to meet me? Why?"

"Our Regent Prince has heard that your looks, your temperament and your intelligence are different from other women."

Cassie whispered, "He thinks I'm a freak. A specimen to add to his menagerie."

In response to her wry frown, Stephen added, "He may have heard you are this Season's best dancer."

Thinking she might have to dance with the toad-like Prince, her frown turned sickly.

"Why didn't you tell me this when you arrived at the Willoughbys?"

"Because I thought you might cry off. If he wants to meet you, you have no choice but to acquiesce."

A flurry of movement and a cascade of voices erupted behind them. Staring was impolite. However, Cassie did have a reputation for unconventional behavior. She turned and stared. The crowd gathered around one man. Not the Prince Regent. His appearance rated a trumpet call. The Prime Minister? The Duke of Wellington?

Stephen led her to one side for a better view. "Oh, you will be so pleased."

"Who has arrived?" she said.

"Don't you recognize him? Your idol."

Eyes wide, her mouth ajar, Cassie was too stunned to even make an "ah" sound. She had seen drawings of him in the newspapers. In person, he was even more gorgeous. His dark wavy hair complimented his perfectly chiseled face and brooding brow. He exuded excitement. With a slight fault in his step, the center of attention walked forward. His entourage followed.

Attention and awe surrounded George Gordon Lord Byron.

Cassie admired his poetry. Seeing him, she knew why ladies made fools of themselves. If Byron had never written a line, he would be almost as adored. And to think his magnificent head swam with rapturous rhymes.

The poet and his crowd passed by. A trumpet sounded. Prinny waddled into the ballroom. All conversation stopped. He walked to the center of the room. His entourage was smaller than Byron's.

The Prince's walk became a stagger. Men on both sides held his arms. This early in his party, and he was drunk already? As he came near, Cassie arranged her feet, one behind the other, in an awkward curtsy. People lined up to greet the Prince Regent.

"Must we?" she asked.

"This is a 'command performance'."

The orchestra played a waltz. A few people danced. She had never been in a room this large before. From their place in line, she studied the paintings. Unless a drawing depicted your ancestors, she never understood the reason to hang portraits. She surveyed the landscapes. Some hung so high on the walls they were hard to see.

Finally, they arrived before their future king. He sat on a chair almost as elaborate as his throne.

Stephen spoke. "Your Royal Highness, may I present Miss Cassiopeia Valient of River's Leap Manor, Nottinghamshire."

The Prince squinted at her. "Who are

you?”

She forced a smile. “Cassiopeia. Um, I dance well. Some say remarkably well.”

Prinny snorted. “Ballet?”

“No. Minuets, gavottes, waltzes.”

With his ring-covered hand, he shoed as if she were a fly. “I don’t know the name. Is your father wealthy?”

“No.”

“Does he have a title?”

She shook her head.

The Prince leaned back in his ornate chair. He stared at the ceiling, then slowly focused his eyes on her. “Who are you, again?”

“No one.” This time, she smiled sincerely.

Stephen moved her past the Prince and into the crowd.

“Well,” he said. “You have now been formally introduced to the future ruler of the British Empire.”

To stifle the laugh that shook her stomach, Cassie put her hands over her mouth. Could she be arrested for guffawing at the inept, drunken fool who would someday be King? The harder she tried, the more mirth overcame her. Stephen tittered as he led her into the corridor.

“Something to tell your grandchildren,” he

said.

Cassie expelled a chortle. "Oh, my goodness. When women are allowed to vote . . ."

"When they what?"

"Vote. We will do a better job of choosing leaders than you men have. I support the Whig Party. Their long campaign to wrest as much power as they can from the monarch is now assured. We have a King who is out of his mind. And his son cares for nothing but his own pleasure."

"Women being elected to the House of Commons," Stephen mused. "I'd vote for you."

"Are people queueing up to greet Lord Byron? If so, I am eager to join that line."

There was no line, but Byron was signing ladies dance cards. Not that he intended to dance with any of them. This custom, known as asking for an "autograph", provided a souvenir to show you had met the esteemed poet. Evidence of a moment in time when this amazing man was aware that you existed.

Cassie slipped her dance card from her reticule. She hooked her arm through Stephen's. He led her to the crush around England's greatest living poet, at least in the minds of every woman in the realm.

They mingled with the crowd but couldn't get close to her idol. Stephen walked her onto the dance floor. The orchestra struck up a minuet. She and her swain dominated the set, and they led the following gavotte.

The music stopped. The musicians needed refreshment and to take trips to the gents. Cassie caught her breath. Stephen poked her arm to make her turn around. A few feet away, Byron walked toward her. Her heart fluttered. Up close, his wild chestnut curls, his piercing black eyes and his sensuous lips made her nearly swoon.

His mouth opened. He spoke. "My lovely lady. You dance like a gazelle prancing across a field of wildflowers. In search of a mate."

"Uhhh," she said.

His smile changed to a crooked grin. Women acted like this toward him all the time. She pulled herself up straight.

He cooed, "Tell me your name."

"Uhhh," she said again.

Stephen filled in the blank. "Her name is Cassiopeia Valient."

"Yes," she said. "Cassiopeia."

Byron turned his back to Stephen, who was forced to step out of the way.

The poet gazed into her eyes. "Cassiopeia.

Are you named for the constellation or the goddess?"

"The constellation," she mumbled.

"Lovely lady who graces the night sky, I would write a poem for you, but I fear I could find no rhyme for your name."

"Ohhhh." She clutched one hand to her bosom.

Never taking his eyes off hers, Byron pried her fingertips from her dress, lifted her hand to his lips, and kissed her knuckles. If her mind had been working, she would have stripped off her glove.

"Cassiopeia," he murmured.

Then he released her hand, turned, and walked away.

Cassie slumped against the nearest wall. Stephen took her arm so she didn't fall to the floor.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Your idol, Lord Byron, made love to you with his eyes. However, you failed to have him sign your dance card."

"He kissed my hand. He said he would write a poem about me. He's right, he will never find a rhyme for my name. This is sooooo wonderful!"

Instantly, a horde of women engulfed her.

Some she recognized, some she didn't. They were all ages from barely sixteen to over eighty. Conversation buzzed around her. She caught snatches of:

"What did he say?"

"Do you have an assignation?"

"Are you his newest lover?"

"How do you know him?"

Stephen helped her to a chair. Cassie tried to assemble the thoughts floating through her head. Her behavior could be brave and foolhardy, but she never played a gushing idiot. Yet, she had gushed over Lord Byron. She regretted not one gush. She would treasure her memory of him forever.

Cassie answered all the women with one sentence. "He wants to write a poem about me." Byron often wrote rhymes about women. She could pretend she inspired one of his future poems.

Several women begged, "What is your name?"

Stephen spoke for her. "Ladies, may I present Miss Cassiopeia Valient."

Cassie had conversations with several ladies who wanted to become her friend. Four asked for her address to send invitations, others asked for her address so they could call

on her. She responded that for the time being her afternoons were tightly scheduled. In minutes, their focus wandered elsewhere, and the women moved on.

Stephen stood beside her. "Are you all right?"

"I will never be the same again. But I can function almost normally."

"Shall we catch the poet's attention by dancing together?"

To shake off her delicious torpor, she needed to move around. Her encounter with Lord Byron would be the talk of the town. For the next week, his desire to write a poem about her would be the "*bon mot*". For so long, she had wanted to be this feminine. If she stifled her opinions and her masculine knowledge, she could become a lady that women envied and men admired.

She danced a waltz with Stephen, then a gavotte, and her favorite, a quadrille. She needed to rest her feet.

A crowd was leaving through the main entrance. With a beautiful woman on his arm, Byron led the way.

Cassie said, "I want one more glimpse of him."

Before Stephen could catch up, she dashed

to the main entrance, forgetting to collect her cape.

~ ~ ~

The next day, cloaked in a cloud of misery, Cassie hid in her room. At the end of the most perfect evening of her life, all her dreams of gaining the *ton's* approval were shattered. Today, she must be the hot topic of conversation for the worst of reasons.

Aunt Patience opened the bedroom door. "Blake is here."

"Tell him I can't see him."

"You tell him. Then you can tell him why you are hiding. And then he can tell me what's going on."

"Aunt P, please."

"No. And don't call me Aunt P."

Cassie was dressed. She'd eaten a nearly silent breakfast with her father. Then she retreated to her room promising to write letters to her sisters. Instead by turns, she looked out her window, lay in bed staring at the ceiling, and rearranged her handkerchief and glove drawer. At the moment, she sat on her bed making plans to put on her shoes.

Heavy steps bounded up the stairs.

Looking into the hallway, her aunt said,

“Blake, you can’t come in here.”

“You guard the door,” he said. “You said Cassie was decently attired.”

Aunt Pat stood aside so he could stride into the room. “Cassie, the sun is shining. And, according to my mother and sister, you are famous.”

“No, no,” she moaned.

“Lord Byron plans to write a poem about you.”

“He can’t,” she insisted. “There are no words that rhyme with Cassiopeia.”

“Still, he considered the possibility.”

“Your relatives didn’t tell you what happened next?”

“No. What happened?” Blake sat in a chair much too small for him. Her arms crossed, Aunt Patience stood in the doorway.

Cassie said, “I might as well tell you together. By now, everyone who is anyone in London, plus all the servants know the whole story.”

Blake almost got to his feet. “Did Byron do something untoward?”

“He did not.”

When neither of her listeners spoke, Cassie said, “I made a fool of myself.”

Blake swallowed a smile. He must regret

missing her discomfort.

“Lord Byron and his friends were leaving.” Cassie wrung her hands. “His devotees followed him outside. I wanted one last glimpse. Enough rain had fallen to make the marble steps slippery. In the courtyard, Byron helped a lady into his carriage.”

Cassie stopped for a breath. Her listeners looked at her like she was the star of a play. “I started down the steps toward him. I wore my new dancing slippers. I’ve danced so much I wore out my other pair.”

“You slipped?” Blake sounded concerned.

“A headlong fall would have been better. I slid off the step. You know I am quite agile, so I righted myself. As I did, I went down another step. And another. I wobbled and teetered and swayed, trying to regain my balance, trying to keep from plunging into my favorite poet. Byron stared at me in horror. He might have rushed to my aid, but with his lame foot he couldn’t. Finally with my balance regained, I stopped on the driveway. Stephen grabbed me about the waist and hustled me down the street to his carriage.”

Still no reaction from Blake or her aunt.

“As you know,” Cassie continued, “everything that happens within eyesight of

Lord Byron is instant gossip. Today, I am the laughingstock of the *ton*.”

Cassie covered her face with her hands. Blake put his arms around her. Sitting beside her on the bed, he gently rubbed her back.

Assured she wasn't going to burst into tears, he lifted her chin. “You are the bravest woman I know. You won't let this stop you.”

Aunt Patience spoke up. “He's right. I suggest you two go upstairs to the sunroom. I have things to do downstairs.”

Blake led Cassie up to the third floor. The upstairs room smelled of must, mice droppings, and stale air. Sunlight filled the space. Large windows, two round ones, one square one, and a thick skylight, streamed in light. The sparse furniture included a chaise lounge and a divan.

Too tense to sit, Cassie walked to the far window and looked into the garden. “I was getting better at being feminine. Women talked to me. Men wanted to dance with me. I wasn't so out of place. I wasn't a freak.”

Blake came up beside her. “You were never a freak. Just unusual in wonderful ways.”

“Stephen suggested we spread the word I was unwell and almost fainted. He's coming

early this evening so we can choose an appropriate malady.”

“Nothing contagious,” Blake advised. “How about the epizootic?”

She laughed. “That’s a horse disease.”

“The ague? You need to fake the shakes for that.”

“To suffer from the ague, you must live near a swamp.”

“You tripped over something? Twisted your ankle.”

She reveled in his frivolous game. “I am not clumsy.”

“Byron compared you to a sure-footed gazelle.”

“Scampering among the wildflowers,” she added.

“You were pushed by a woman jealous of Byron’s attention to you.”

“I won’t tell a lie. The ladies were eager to know what he said to me.”

“Earlier in the day, you rode sidesaddle and were thrown by your horse.”

“I never ride sidesaddle, and Valor would not throw me. What else?”

From behind her, he pressed his hands against the window frame. Without touching, he surrounded her. “You were faint from not

eating enough. Some women starve to become thinner.”

She loved the rich food set out at the nightly buffets and midnight suppers. “I always eat as much as I want. Besides, men don’t like thin women, do they?”

Blake glanced over her shoulder, then slowly raised his eyes to hers. “I certainly don’t.”

“What else can you suggest?”

“You’ve rejected them all. You could decamp to River’s Leap and hide.”

“Tempting, but you and I need to keep track of our parents’ romance.”

“Do you really care what these nattering ninnies say about you?”

“I have to care.”

He pondered. “I’ll tell you what I would do.”

“You are a man.”

“When we act the fool, we fellows get taunts.”

“What would you do?” she asked.

His biceps brushed her shoulders. “I would make the story my own.”

“Tell people what happened? They already know.”

“Not everyone saw you. Those who

witnessed the spectacle don't know why you slipped and slid and tottered and teetered and almost fell in the arms of the lauded Lord Byron."

Intrigued, Cassie turned around. "Continue."

He moved his hands to her shoulders. "Go out today and tonight and every day and night. Repeat your story. What a shame to let his remark on your name be drowned out by your misadventure. Tell one and all how you wanted one last glimpse of his handsome face. You slipped on the rain slick marble. You tried to save yourself from injury. You were desperate to save Byron from an embarrassing incident. Your horror. Your fear. Lay the pathos on thick."

She could tell the truth, but would any in the *ton* be sympathetic?

"You must make your story amusing," he said. "Laugh at your foolish infatuation. If you tell the story with panache, the legend becomes yours. An anecdote others will repeat."

His suggestion had merit. "How do I make my misery mirthful?"

"I've caused enough outlandish incidents. I'm an expert at concocting a good story. I will

instruct you on how to be both humorous and dramatic. You can practice on me. Over and over, tell me your story until you see the humor.”

By being honest, she could continue to be ladylike. But must she be humorous? She found nothing funny about almost colliding with Lord Byron.

“Another adventure for the outrageous Miss Valient,” Blake said. “Stephen has not changed you as much as you think. You are still my wild Cassiopeia.”

She didn’t want to be wild. Maybe a little she did. Could she be a proper young lady and an adventurous woman?

Chapter 12

The House Party

Cassie followed Blake's advice. Each time she told her story of almost falling into Lord Byron, she exaggerated the details more and more. Her listeners laughed, especially the men. In a few days, the *ton* had switched to gossip about the poet's latest mistress.

Sometimes she missed doing whatever came into her head, but Stephen continued to instruct her in how to be a well-bred young lady. Blake liked her regardless of how she behaved or misbehaved. Was he trying to be more the gentleman and less the rascal? She missed some of his bravado, but he was easier to deal with.

Saturday morning, she peered out the front parlor window. Too early as usual, Blake sat on the porch bench. Today, she, Blake, and Stephen were going to a house party near Kingston on Thames. Except for arranging her hair, Cassie was dressed and ready for their jaunt into the country.

She slipped out the door and sat beside him. He remained unmoved. She poked his ribs. As if to bite her, he snatched her hand and lifted her fingers to his mouth. Instead, he kissed her palm. For all his rough ways, he could be romantic.

He returned her damp hand to her lap. "You know what we're up against today."

To keep his digits from rambling, she gripped his hand. "A long ride through the blossoming hills of Surreyshire," she said. "A horde of people feasting on the results of the previous day's hunt." The upper crust were invited to spend several days. The less crusty such as themselves only attended on Saturday. "Children playing games. Musical entertainment. Tennis perhaps. With nice weather, most activities will take place outdoors."

"A picnic," he grunted.

"You don't care for picnics?"

When he didn't respond, she went on, "Something else has you in a lather. You are brooding on the outside and seething on the inside." Again, no response. "Are you upset because our parents will be joining us? James and Grace will have opportunities to wander down secluded garden paths. In the midst of

piquant groves, they will enjoy small ponds. Perhaps a maze or the odd folly.”

He frowned. “Their romance doesn’t bother you? Of course not. This is your father and my mother.”

“Blake, you and I should endeavor to help our parents. They are both happy. My father is happier than he’s been in years. How fares your mother?”

He stretched out his long legs. “My mother is giddy. She smiles for no reason. When I tease her or try to make her angry, she pats my arm and tells me to be a good boy. This is all your father’s fault.”

Strange complaint that her father made his mother happy. “Maybe Grace has loved my father a long time. For reasons we both know, she kept her feelings hidden in her heart. Now she can express them. My father returns the sentiment. He loved my mother, but he’s been lonely since she died. Grace has been lonely, too.”

“What does your father want from my mother?”

She refused to let Blake inflame her anger. As long as she was in control, she could express righteous indignation. She was the wise, the contemplative, the well-behaved

Cassie. If she broke out in a rash from trying so hard, she would bathe herself in salve and keep on smiling.

“Ask him yourself,” she spat out. “My father is an honest man. He’ll tell you the truth.”

She got to her feet, opened the door, and went inside. She didn’t exactly slam the door, more like closed it with enthusiasm.

~ ~ ~

Moments later, Blake looked up. The front door opened. He expected Cassie to return and continue their argument. Under Stephen’s influence, she acted so polite Blake sometimes almost lost interest. But he knew the real Cassie lived inside her somewhere.

Instead, he beheld James Valient.

“May I join you?” the man asked.

Blake pulled in his feet and let Cassie’s father pass.

“You have questions about my relationship with your mother.”

“It is not my place to ask. She is a grown woman.”

“You have every right to ask,” James said. “Your mother will always be your responsibility.”

The words he had rehearsed to scare this man away flew around inside Blake's head. He couldn't catch any of them. "I want no scandal attached to her name."

"There will be no scandal," James promised.

"You two spend a lot of time alone." Today, the star struck couple would find more places to be alone. "Women receive the worst of hateful gossip. A man can be forgiven, even admired for misbehaving. A woman is tainted forever."

James nodded. "How much has your mother told you of our long ago romance?"

"I have not asked her, and she has not volunteered."

"I will tell you all I remember. If my tale lacks details, please interrupt with questions. Is that what you want?"

No, he didn't. A son wants to believe his mother is pure as fresh fallen snow. That she's never been touched by anyone but her husband. However, if that were true, she would have had very little physical enjoyment in her life.

"If you offer more than I want to hear, I'll stop you."

James looked across the road. Was he

seeing those days long ago? “When I was young, I loved the ladies, any and all. You may not think so now, but women found me handsome. I loved to dance, to ride, to drink, though not to excess. I loved and lost many a maid. Mind you, I never ‘ruined’ any woman. I never took advantage of serving girls nor did I visit doxies. But I enjoyed myself. I studied at Cambridge, which made me something of a catch.”

“Oh.” Blake had hoped the man would say he was reserved and Mother had drawn him out. “Go on.”

“Sydney was my best friend at university. He was terrified of girls. I gave him lessons on how to chat with a young lady, how to ask her to dance, to get her to step out with him, even how to steal a kiss. I offered my sister to practice on.”

Blake’s mouth fell open. “You what?”

“My sister Patience. Though today you’d never suspect it, she believed men didn’t find her attractive. I thought they might suit and they did.”

Blake laughed. “Matchmaker.”

James wagged his head. “That summer, I invited Syd to spend a few weeks with our family at River’s Leap. When we arrived, Pat

introduced us to her new friend. When I met Grace . . .”

The man stopped talking at the most important part of his story. “You met my mother. Then what?”

James licked his lips. “Looking at her, I was struck dumb. I couldn’t think of one lively word to say. That moment of insanity lasted until she smiled. Then I couldn’t stop talking and listening and laughing. And just looking at her.”

Blake felt dumbstruck himself. His mother had the upper hand from the beginning? “You fell in love at first sight?”

“Not at all. At first, she terrified me. She likes to be in charge. She arranged every daytime outing and organized every evening at home. The rest of us followed her lead. Grace made the best plans. And she wanted me. Don’t be alarmed, though I was at the time. Your mother pursued me shamelessly.”

“I beg your pardon.” Blake started to stand up in protest.

James grabbed his arm. “I savored every minute with her. I fell under her spell. You know what she’s like. She’s amazing.”

Yes, his mother was amazing. “Then what happened?”

“Right then and there, she wanted to marry me. I had two more years of school before earning my degree. She was barely sixteen. I said we should wait until I had a successful practice. I studied medicine, you know.”

“Cassie told me. Not much income from your practice though.” Blake shot the dig, but the man deserved to have his shortcomings questioned.

“I cure a lot of people. Make their lives longer and easier.”

Blake admitted James won that battle of words. “Now you’ve taken up again with my mother.”

“All those years ago, I regret I put her off. I loved my wife to distraction, but I first loved Grace.”

“She set her cap for you.”

“I had no hope of a title and not much in the way of funds. I convinced her to wait. We kept in touch by post. After a year, she stopped writing. Later, I learned her parents intercepted my letters. Her father made inquiries and found me unsuitable. They wanted her to marry well. I did not fit the requirement. Grace married your father. When I learned of her marriage, I believed she had

rejected me.”

“I see.” Blake could think of only one more question. “If I ask you something, will you promise not to tell my mother?”

James laughed. “You sound like a little boy. What is your question?”

“The other day when Cassie and I arrived, you and my mother came down from upstairs together. What were you doing up there?”

“I won’t tell your mother that you asked, but I will answer in delicious detail.”

~ ~ ~

An hour later in the Willoughby’s carriage, Blake jolted along with Cassie, Stephen, and Sydney. The horses carried them past tree rows, farm fields, and occasional cows and horses.

Stephen made small talk. Cassie said nothing. Sometimes she stared at Blake. Her lips were pursed, not like for a kiss, more like preparing to spit.

To protect himself, he spoke up. “Cassie, I like your father. I wouldn’t want anyone else to squire my mother around. They are having fun. He seems content to let her take the lead. He’s a brave man to take orders from a woman.”

Cassie's lips opened, not into a smile but a little more friendly.

He moved the conversation onto safer ground. "I asked James what he and my mother were doing upstairs that day at your aunt and uncle's house."

Uncle Syd, who had been napping, stirred to life. His eyes opened. "What happened at my house? Was I home?"

Cassie patted his arm. "You were in the City on business. Blake, Patience, and I came in from a garden walk. We were in the front parlor when my father and Grace came down from upstairs. That was the day they arrived together."

The man looked at Blake. "What were they doing up there together?" He had the right to know what transpired in his house.

As the only one present who knew the story, Blake continued. "James did not explain why they went upstairs. I believe Mother led the way." His next words were hard to speak since they concerned his sainted parent. "They put James's luggage in an unused bedroom. My mother helped him unpack."

"My father needs help with such things," Cassie said.

"Unpacking accomplished, they sat on the

bed, the room being short on chairs. One thing led to another.”

“I beg your pardon,” Sydney exclaimed.

“If you must know the details, they shared some hugs and a few kisses. They’re both old enough. No chaperone necessary. The affection became overheated. James was about to suggest they go downstairs when Grace jumped up and said she wanted to see Cassie’s ball gowns.”

Blake knew why. He provided the cash, and Stephen delivered Mother’s instructions to Patience. He wondered how much Sydney knew of this scheme. “Mother took each gown from the closet or trunk. She examined them and made comments. Something about food spots and bits of mud on hems. Then they sat on Cassie’s bed. I believe that room is smaller. Another shortage of chairs. Syd, old fellow, you should look into the dearth of seating at your house. Adding more furniture could prevent future problems.”

Sydney tapped Blake’s knee. “What happened on Cassie’s bed?”

“The same as in the guest room. Kisses, hugs, hand holding. I didn’t want too much description. Then they heard us arrive and came downstairs.”

Cassie frowned. "Why didn't they use the back stairs? They could have come in through the kitchen, and we wouldn't have been any the wiser."

Blake pondered that. Had Mother wanted to warn him of what was brewing?

~ ~ ~

In the Manor's backyard, Cassie watched a hundred or more people wander among the tents, chairs and tables all decorated with ribbons and festoons. Soft music wafted from violins, flutes, and oboes. Waiters hurried about with platters of *hors d'oeuvres*. Stephen linked his arm through hers. Blake walked by her other side.

Luncheon involved several courses highlighted with quail, pheasant and other birds in tasty sauces. Sunshine warmed the acres of lawn. As the afternoon progressed, Stephen and Blake enjoyed each other's company more than they did hers. She watched them play tennis. They left her alone when they went hunting for cricket bats. As she predicted, the smitten parents wandered hand in hand beside a stream. Cassie had trouble keeping her eyes open. Too much fresh air. She'd been out late last night with

Stephen, and Blake arrived too early this morning. Time for her nap. She left her two swains to their games and did her own wandering.

Climbing a small hill, she beheld a meadow of yellow and white wildflowers. To one side stood a stone folly. Pillars held up the domed roof. She walked up the steps. Through the rusted gate, she peered inside. The pillars looked sturdy enough, but the space in the middle needed repairs. Parts of the walls reached the ceiling. Other sections had crumbled from the top. Most of the debris was swept into a corner. Large windows offered views of the meadow and the forest beyond. Some windows were broken. In some, even the window frame was missing.

Cassie shoved on the creaky gate until she had room to squeeze inside. Cautious about what she might trip on, she slid her gloved hand over the rough plaster wall. The breeze scattered dead leaves across the floor. Small animals scurried away. *Adventurous me, going where I shouldn't. But this should be safe.* Other than the gate, nothing rasped or shook or trembled. Along one undamaged wall, a wide stone bench beckoned. She sat down. The hard surface cooled her bottom.

From below the bench, she pulled out a large rattan box. Inside, she found pillows, a comforter, and a blanket. All were clean and fresh. Someone had used this space recently. She spread the comforter on the bench. She would rest her eyes for a few minutes. Flies buzzed outside her hideaway. A little light from the windows seeped through her closed eyelids. Cassie yawned and settled her head against the pillow.

~ ~ ~

What seemed like minutes later, she awoke to voices. Outside, two men talked as they walked toward the folly. Cassie wanted to peek at them, but she also wanted to sleep longer. She snuggled against the pillow.

“She’s here somewhere,” Blake said. “Hiding from us.”

“Not hiding,” Stephen said. “Looking for a reprieve from you and I arguing over who is best at darts and who missed which volley on the tennis court. We have ignored her.”

Blake laughed. “We’ve had fun without her.”

Cassie was the “her” they referred to. She should stand up and yell “halloo”. *Should I act offended? Or should I eavesdrop in silence?*

“Which direction now?” Stephen asked.

Blake’s voice changed as if he might have slid down the wall to sit on the ground. To hear better, Cassie moved her head closer to the open window.

She could see the back of Stephen’s head. He leaned against the wall. She watched him bend over, probably placing his handkerchief on the ground where he planned to sit.

“Speaking of Cassie,” Blake said, “how far have you gone with her?”

Stephen’s head disappeared downward. “Today is the farthest distance we have traveled.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do. Your question is improper.”

“When have I ever been proper? A kiss or two? A cuddle? You dance with her frequently. All those waltzes. I get to help her down from Valor and maybe hold her hand once in a while. Tell me, have you kissed her?”

She should make them stop, but she couldn’t resist. Cassie leaned out the window to look down on their heads. Stephen pointed to his cheek. Yes, he had kissed her there several times. Then to his chin. Once he missed her cheek, and his mouth landed there.

He pointed below his ear. She especially remembered that one. It was his most romantic gesture.

Blake shook his head, or at least the top of his head moved back and forth. "Your aim is terrible. Her mouth is the target, old son."

Stephen laughed. "You are the marksman. What targets have you hit?"

"None," he said. "Just one kiss when I rescued her in Sherwood Forest."

"You've attempted nothing more?"

"I don't know how much I can get away with. Her punch could be lethal. I've always been with women who took the lead. Cassie isn't leading me anywhere. Damnedest woman I ever met."

"Then why do you continue to court her?"

"I thought you were love-struck with her," Blake said.

"Fascinated to be sure. I admire her courage, her independence, her sense of adventure. How she can laugh at herself. And you? Aside from the investment you've made, why haven't you given up on Cassie?"

What has he invested in me?

"I admire her snapping eyes, her thick sable hair cascading over her shoulders. The shape of her legs when she's wearing riding

trousers. And her bosom . . .”

“Blake,” Stephen interrupted. “Your ardor needs to focus beyond her physical attributes.”

“I love to see her angry,” Blake continued. “And to see her happy. She’s always so obvious about what she’s thinking. No holding back.”

“Your list is too short for a lifelong relationship.”

When Blake’s head started to rise, Cassie crouched against the wall. She watched Stephen rise to stand beside him.

“Whoever she chooses,” Blake said, “and she may reject both of us, you and I will be friends for life.”

“Absolutely,” Stephen said. “I shall be best man at your wedding, or you can stand up at mine. That is, if either of us decides to marry her.”

Blake said, “What are your plans regarding the intriguing Miss Valient?”

Stephen sighed. “To accompany her as long as she will have me.”

His words warmed her heart. What were Blake’s plans?

“And yourself?” Stephen prompted.

“The same as yours. Until she tires of me. I fear I will be the first man she casts aside.”

“Undoubtedly, you will give her good reason.”

“I don’t goad her as much as I used to. I’m trying to be more of a gentleman. And no, I do not need any lessons from you.”

Both her escorts wanted to be with her for as long as she allowed. Someday, she must make a decision, or they would make it for her. Until then, she vowed to enjoy them both.

Enough of eavesdropping. This building didn’t even have eaves. She wanted to see if they were surprised. Had they known all along she was listening and had put on a show for her?

Cassie stuck her arms out the window and tapped their shoulders. “Halloo.”

They both flinched, then turned wide-eyed to look at her.

In unison, one said, “Could you hear us?” and the other said, “How long have you been listening?” She wasn’t sure who said what.

“I may need help getting out through the folly gate.”

Blake brushed his fingers along the windowsill. “Come out this way. We’ll catch you.”

“I don’t think I should.”

But she wanted to. A small adventure, not

dangerous, and only observed by her two fellows. She folded the bedding and returned it to the box, climbed on the bench, and leaned out the window. Blake took one arm, Stephen the other. Each man put his free arm around her waist. They eased her through the opening and down to the ground. She brushed dust and leaves from her clothes and hair.

Cassie accepted the arm each man offered. She wanted to join their conversation, though not the discussion of where, when or how they should kiss her.

“Let me tell you what I like about each of you.”

Blake put up his hand. “Not necessary. Your list for Stephen will outshine mine.”

“Blake, I like your playfulness and your honesty,” she said. “You encourage me to be myself. You didn’t huff and puff when I won your horse.” He had other attributes, most of them physical, which she chose not to enumerate.

Blake frowned. “And Stephen’s good points?”

She looked at her shorter beau. “His beautiful eyes, his sweet soft words, his gentle instruction on how to be more ladylike.”

Stephen favored her with his perfect

smile.

Blake said, "I will try to smile more. And talk softly. I don't know any sweet words."

"If you did, I wouldn't recognize you," she teased. "If either of you ever proposes to me, where shall our wedding be?"

They walked across the meadow, arm in arm in arm. Her last remark stopped them. "As you know, I have no dowry. My father's will leaves my husband one-third of River's Leap. Depending on my choice of mate, he might relinquish the land sooner."

"Nottingham," Blake said. "Saint Peter's Church. The one with the side yard for a fast getaway."

She loved that ancient building. "Before I make a decision, which may never be necessary, I want to visit Stephen's estate. I very much like Green Garden, but Stephen's property may be more appealing."

Stephen squeezed her hand. "You will like Belmond Castle."

"You live in a Castle?" He hadn't mentioned this.

"No, but we have a small castle on the property. With a moat."

Chapter 13

The Little Boy

Late one night, Cassie walked with Stephen to the Willoughby's door. He didn't kiss her. He hadn't attempted a peck since she overheard Blake commenting on his "bad aim" at the picnic. With her key, she opened the door. Inside, she pushed back the crocheted curtain and peered out. Stephen climbed into his carriage and his driver pulled away.

In six weeks, the Season would end, and she would return to River's Leap. What an adventure this last month had been. Stephen taught her to be more feminine. She loved how he pampered her. At first, she forced herself to be sweet when she felt sour, to speak gently when she wanted to yell, to smile when she found no reason to. Now, most of the time these habits came naturally. Dressed for a ball, her hair braided and waved, she would examine herself in the long mirror. She saw a woman who was beautiful in her own way. Since her kidnapping plan went awry,

Cassie had avoided outrageous adventures.

Blake still encouraged her hidden nature. He baited her until she showed a flash of ire especially when they discussed their parents romance. He, too, had mellowed. He was more thoughtful and less beguiling. She tried not to think of the other effect he had on her. Even when he wasn't trying to lure her into his arms, his sexual allure beckoned. Every part of her wayward body wanted to have the greatest, and most disastrous, adventure of her life.

On the porch, something moved. She peeked one eye around the curtain. A child looked up at the brass doorknocker. He started to turn away. Was he lost? She pulled the door open.

In the light from the streetlamp, she beheld an urchin. About four feet tall, the sad faced boy wore clothes too thin for the cool night wind. For an instant, his eyes met hers. He turned to flee. She dashed out the door and grabbed his shoulders.

He sniffed as if holding on to tears. "Please, please let me go."

Still holding him tight, Cassie turned him around. "What are doing here in the middle of the night?"

“I got a letter for the young lady what lives here.”

“I am that young lady.”

“You sure? I mean, you’re the only young one here?”

“I am sure.” She wrapped her arm around his shoulders. The boy shook either from fear or the chilly air. Cassie led him into the foyer. “Stay with me. I will read the missive. Then you can tell me who sent you.”

Who would send a child out on a windy night to deliver a letter? She closed the door and locked it.

The boy struggled to pull the letter from his pocket. He tried to hand it to her, but she held back. “I will not accept this until you’ve had something to eat.”

As she walked with him to the kitchen, the boy twisted his head. He looked into the front parlor. In the hall dimly lit by gas jets, he glanced up the stairs. He gawked at the ceiling three stories above. He seemed more curious than afraid.

In the kitchen, Cassie lit two lanterns. From the larder, she took out bread, pickles, and butter. The icebox provided leftover chicken from supper along with milk and jam. On Aunt Patience’s second-best dishes, Cassie

arranged the meal and put it before him.

“What’s this for?” he said.

“For you. Aren’t you hungry?” The child was so thin. His young face looked haggard. His cheeks sagged. His mouth turned down. His eyes were huge.

She said, “You can eat all this food with your fingers.”

He reached for the food, but she grabbed his hand. “Wait.”

She dipped a clean dishrag in the water barrel and wiped his dirty hands. She pushed up the sleeves of his too large blouse to wash his arms. Instead of shrinking as most boys did when touched with clean water, he lifted his chin. She smoothed the rag over his face and ears. This child needed a warm bath followed by a night’s sleep in a comfortable bed.

He handed her the letter. While he ate, she cautioned him not to gulp down his food. Since he wasn’t used to such rich fare, he could upset his stomach. He smeared butter on the roll, then licked the butter off his finger.

The back of the folded paper read *To Miss Valient*. The letter had no seal. Nothing could keep this lad from reading the contents.

With hands clenched, Cassie unfolded the paper. The signature at the bottom read *The*

Gentleman Bandit. Her heart turned over. After meeting the man's daughter in Hyde Park, Blake had warned her to expect something like this. Instead, she'd put the episode out of her mind. How foolish. Stifling a gasp, she clutched the paper with both hands. To better read the printed words, she slid the lantern closer.

Miss Valiant.

You owe me 50 pounds for the ransom, even though you run off before I could get to you. A bargain is a bargain. If I don't get my money quick, I will tell the world you were set to cheat Lord Rayneford out of 600 pounds. He seems to fancy you. What would he say if he knew the plain truth? I'll also sell what I know to a newspaper that likes to print scandal.

Lately your pa came into some money. Tell him to share with me. No paper, all specie, all English coins. I give you three. He had scratched out that word and replaced it with two days to get me money together.

No instructions followed about where to deliver the money. Did Mr. Durgan plan to show up at the Willoughby's and hope to find her at home? The Gentleman Bandit sometimes kidnapped people for ransom,

especially if the person he robbed had no cash or jewels handy. This letter showed a lack of planning. Another letter must be coming. The child may well be the one who delivers it.

As he ate his food, Cassie watched the little boy. The chicken was gone except for bones. He now chewed on a pickle. He had saved the bread and butter for last. His milk was almost gone. She lay down the letter and refilled his glass.

Cassie tried to stay calm because this boy would report her reaction to Mr. Durgan. Would the man haunt her until she paid him? Or would he demand endless payments? A public airing of her kidnap scheme would injure her father, embarrass her sisters, and upset her aunt and uncle. Stephen didn't know about the original plan. How would his affection change when she told him? Blake, who had protected her, would look the fool.

To keep from crumpling the paper, she stiffened her fingers. Carefully, she folded the letter along its creases. Then she smoothed the paper and slipped it into her reticule. The Bandit entrusted this child with an unsealed letter. The boy must know more.

She fought to keep the panic from her voice. "Did you enjoy your food?"

“Best I ever ate. You’ve got a good cook here.”

“You read this letter, didn’t you?”

“No, ma’am. I don’t know how to read. That’s why he give it a me. I know the numbers and most of the letters. Just not the words.” He licked his thumbs thoroughly.

“You got bad news?”

Could she look menacing? Did she even want to? “The man who wrote this is evil.”

The boy lowered his head. “I know.”

“You shouldn’t run errands for him.” That was the wrong thing to say. Mr. Durgan had a daughter. This lad might be his son.

“I got no choice.”

In case the Bandit wasn’t his father, she asked, “How much does he pay you?”

“He don’t pay me nothin’. My pa owes him money. Pa ran off, so the man is makin’ my ma pay. She works all the time, so I works for the man. Sometimes nights, he takes me along to climb over a fence or shinny up a drainpipe. I opens a window and brings out somethin’ he wants. I’m good at climbin’. I never fell once. Other nights, he sends me to deliver letters or packages.”

“Mr. Durgan?” she asked. That didn’t sound like the Bandit’s usual method of

thievery.

“Who’s Mr. Durgan?” he asked.

“The man who gave you this letter.”

He eyed the roll. “I don’t know his name.”

The child must have been taught not to talk with his mouth full. She stood up and let him finish his meal. In the larder, she found a covered plate. Beneath was leftover lemon cake with cream frosting. She cut a slice for the boy and one for herself. She brought the plates and forks to the table. He’d finished the roll and was wiping his hands on the damp rag. Not a crumb lay on the table. Either he was exceptionally neat, or he had used his damp fingers to pick up every last one.

“Do you like cake?” she asked.

“I had cake only two times.”

She put the plate in front of him. “Lemon. Made fresh yesterday.”

Cassie handed him a fork. He stabbed off a small bite and filled his mouth. While he let the moist, tart cake fall apart on his tongue, he blinked his eyes like he was about to fall asleep.

She wanted to ask his name, but he probably wouldn’t tell her.

“How old are you?” she asked.

He swallowed. “I don’t know. How old do

you think?"

"Nine or ten?"

"Maybe nine."

"Your mother has a job?"

"She works for a family. They let us live in the cellar. And my little sister, too. The place is clean, and they give us their leftover food. But they don't pay ma hardly nothing."

"You watch your sister while your mother works?"

"We both do. I work in the house. Now that the weather's nice, I do more outside. Weeds, leaves, moving dirt and rocks. I like to work out in the air."

This nine-year-old child had a full-time job during the day and ran errands at night for a thief. Among the poor of London, he was one of the lucky children. He had a mother and a place to live.

"If you didn't have to work for Mr. Durgan, your life would be much better."

"But I do."

"If I can arrange it so the evil man no longer bothers you, would you help me?"

"You can't do that. You're a girl."

"I know two men, strong, fearless men, who will help me."

The boy's tongue explored for frosting on

his upper lip. "What kind of help do you want?"

"I don't know yet. Mr. Durgan will send another letter. He may have you deliver it. By then, my two friends will have a plan."

The boy bit his lips together. "What if he finds out I helped you?"

"We will make sure he doesn't find out. I will protect you. I promise."

"My ma and my sister, too?"

"And I will pay for your help."

She could almost see him thinking, "How much will you pay?", but he didn't say the words out loud.

"Thank you," he said. "You're a fine lady, and you've got a fine house. And really good cake."

At that moment, her aunt appeared in the doorway. Cassie glanced out the window. The sun wasn't coming up. Had they made enough noise to wake her?

Aunt Patience stared at Cassie's small confederate. "What goes on here?"

"We're having a late-night snack," Cassie said. "I found him sleeping on the front porch." She winked at the child. He grinned. "He seems to be lost. Once daylight comes, he assures me he can find his way home."

“You fed him stale cake?” her aunt said.

He spoke up. “The best cake I ever ate. And chicken. And pickles. And bread and butter.” Looking exhausted, he yawned and slumped back in his chair.

Aunt Patience gathered up the plates and utensils and put them in the sink. She returned the leftover cake and pickles to the larder. When Cassie looked back at the boy, his eyes were closed. Almost asleep, his breathing gentled.

“No sleeping in my kitchen,” her aunt said. His eyes flew open. “Sorry.”

“Come, little man. First, you shall have a sponge bath. Then we will go upstairs. You shall pick the bedroom you want to sleep in. Tomorrow, I will sort through my youngest son’s castoff clothes. Some of them may fit you.”

Aunt Patience ushered the child into the hall. She warned him to make no sound. As they climbed the stairs, the boy took her hand.

Cassie’s guilt overwhelmed her. Now her aunt was involved. She followed them upstairs. After her aunt settled the boy in bed, the woman would have a barrage of questions. Cassie undressed and prepared for bed. Sliding the blackmail letter under her pillow, she

crawled between the covers and waited for her aunt. But that night, Cassie had no more visitors.

~ ~ ~

The next morning, Cassie slept later than she meant to. Off and on, she'd been awake thinking about how Blake and Stephen would deal with the blackmail letter. Given the threat, Blake would have to help her. He'd be angry at her foolishness but excited at the chance to take Mr. Durgan down. Stephen wouldn't desert her, but he might end their courtship.

By the time Cassie came down to breakfast, Aunt Pat had fed the little boy. Except for his scuffed shoes, he no longer looked like a street urchin. He wore brown knickers, a white linen shirt, and a wool jacket. More of her cousin's outgrown clothes lay in a pile next to a haversack. The boy ran to Cassie and stuck out his clean hands for inspection.

"This is the best night and morning I ever had. Cake, a big bed, new clothes. I love everybody in this house. And I love the house, too."

The front door stood open. Cassie folded

the clothes into the haversack and hoisted it on the boy's back.

"Before you leave, tell me about the man who sent you. What does he look like?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't look at him real hard. He don't like me to."

This child knew the rules of criminal behavior. "Is he tall or short?"

"Short for a man. Skinny too. Like he don't get enough to eat. With the money my ma gives him and what he steals, he could eat better. He's jumpy. Can't stand still. His fingers always fidget."

Her heart beat too fast. From the description, she knew the man he described. He wasn't Dan Durgan. "What color is his hair?"

"What hair he's got, and there's none on top of his head, is a reddish brown. Like a roan horse. His other hair straggles around his head."

"You've given me an excellent description. What about his eyes?"

"Sneaky. Squinting. Maybe he can't see good, but he don't wear spectacles."

"What color are his eyes?"

"Light brown like his hair."

"Does he have an accent?"

“You mean French? No.”

“North country like Scottish or west like Welch?” The child stared as if he had no idea what she meant. “Never mind.”

The boy went to the doorway and looked up and down the street. “He ain’t from London. I know all the ways people here talk.”

Cassie smiled. “Thank you. You have been very helpful.” She wished she had some coins to give him. She would catch up the next time they met.

“Yes, ma’am. I gotta go now. Ma will be worryin’.”

“Just one more thing. You remember what you promised me?”

“I didn’t promise you nothin’.”

Outside now, he started toward the steps. She grabbed his arm. He tried to wiggle free, but she pinched his elbow. So thin, he didn’t have the strength to pull away.

“All right then, I ask you again. Will you help me get rid of the evil man who makes you work for him? If you do, my friends and I will make sure he never bothers you and your family again.”

His mouth puckered. She wanted to brush his shaggy hair out of his eyes, but she didn’t.

“Do I have to tell me ma?”

She was trying to engage a nine-year-old in a dangerous undertaking. Would his mother stop him or encourage him? “Not if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t. If the man sends me with another letter, when should I come to make sure you’re home? You rich people stay out all night, don’t ya?”

“Sometimes we do. In all likelihood, he will send you in the next two days. Each night, I’ll make sure I am home by one in the morning. Do you know how to tell time?”

He nodded. “I listen for the church bells.”

She placed her hand on top of his head. He reached up and patted her fingers. Then he darted down the steps and headed up the sidewalk. He raced and skipped down the block before he disappeared into an alley.

Cassie wiped the back of her hand across her face. *What have I done, and how can I make it right? How many people will be injured along the way? I should just admit to my extortion scheme and live in infamy. But I can’t. Too many other people will suffer.*

When she returned to the foyer, her aunt blocked the hallway.

Hands on her hips, a frown disturbed her pleasant face. “Cassiopeia, did you, in fact,

find that precious child asleep on our porch?"

Trying to suppress the tremor in her voice, she swallowed. "He was sleepy."

Aunt Pat's mouth became a thin, nearly white line. "Lost as he was in Mayfair far past midnight, did the little ragamuffin choose our porch at random?"

"He wasn't lost. He chose our porch because he had a message for me."

"What is going on in my household? I have known you since you were born. Your courage, daring, and sometimes lack of good sense is why Grace thought you and Blake might suit. Those qualities do not suit me."

Until she talked to Blake and Stephen, Cassie couldn't tell her aunt much more. However, as her houseguest, she had to answer some questions. "Two months ago, I did something courageous, daring, and very much lacking in good sense. I thought the outcome was settled, but it appears not to be. You are in no danger. Blake and Stephen will help me. Do Uncle Syd or my father know the boy spent the night?"

"James arose early and went to visit Grace. Syd left for his office soon after. The door to the boy's room remained shut. Is your father involved with your peccadillo?"

Though she wanted to escape, Cassie forced herself to stand still. Her mind swarmed with worry. She stretched her neck to see the pendulum clock behind Aunt Patience. This afternoon, what time would Blake arrive?

“My father knows nothing of what I did. If he finds out, he will wail and moan that my reckless behavior is his fault. That since my mother died, he has raised me all wrong. None of my thoughtless behavior is his fault. My nature is perverse. Since I moved here with you, I have tried to control myself. For the most part, I have succeeded.” She squinted at Aunt Pat’s hips, afraid to see if her hands had turned into fists. “I don’t want my father to know what happened here overnight. When all is settled, I will confess to him.”

Aunt Patience took a few steps and gave Cassie a hug. “Will we ever see that beautiful boy again?”

“I expect to. Probably in the next few days.”

She couldn’t read her aunt’s expression, but she knew the woman loved her.

“Make sure you invite the lad in,” Aunt Patience said. “I remember where I stored other clothes that are more his size.”

Chapter 14

Blackmail

The pendulum clock chimed the eleventh hour. After a hasty breakfast, Cassie walked in the garden. Desperate to stop thinking about her misdeeds and how to deal with the results, she paced around the outside of the house. When Blake rode up, she ran to greet him. She grabbed his arm and headed for the flagstone path that ran beside the house.

He patted her hand. "My goodness, you're glad to see me."

"I must discuss something with you."

"Am I in trouble again?"

"No," she said. "I am. Come with me to the back of the property where no one can hear us."

Behind the house stood a six-foot high hedgerow. Blake pushed through an open space and bent his fingers for her to follow. On the other side, patches of wildflowers tiptoed beneath the trees. Seed tops waved from the tall grass. She helped him part the

stalks so they could walk through the moist underbrush. Beneath tree branches and tall weeds, they found a wooden bench. With his pocketknife, Blake cut through enough vegetation for them to sit down. Cassie scooted so close to him, their thighs touched.

Blake put his arm around her shoulder. "What kind of trouble are you in now?" His playful tone implied they were about to embark on another romp.

"The same one as before," she said.

Cassie slipped the blackmail letter from her pocket. He lifted the paper from her fingers. She watched his face as he read. His expression went from concern to anger to determination. He folded the paper and handed it back to her.

"There is more," she said.

"Really? What else could there be?"

Cassie told him about the little boy who delivered the letter, his relationship with the blackmailer, and his promise to help. She included how she fed the lad and Aunt Pat had invited him to spend the night.

"I asked the boy to describe his 'employer' to me. He is not Dan Durgan."

"How can you be sure? None of Durgan's victims have seen his face."

“The man who sent this note is the one I met in Nottingham. He connected me with Mr. Durgan.”

“This is from Durgan’s accomplice.”

“Perhaps not. His letter doesn’t mention the money we gave Mr. Durgan’s daughter in Hyde Park.”

His lips pursed, his eyes staring, Blake face showed smothered fury.

Cassie tried to stay calm. Fear had nothing to do with her feelings because she had nothing to fear. Whatever scandal arose, she deserved the world’s scorn. This evil man could threaten her family. If Blake and Stephen helped her, they would be in danger. Her fault, all of this was her fault. Regardless of the outcome, her future actions could never redeem her sin. Blake and Stephen might end their friendship with her. She deserved their rebuke.

Blake said, “In his next letter, the fiend will instruct you to deliver the money to some remote location. Stephen and I will accompany you. If we have enough advance knowledge of the location, we can . . .”

Cassie’s self-control broke. Tears streamed from her eyes. Shrieking inside her head, she gasped out sobs. She had never cried this hard

in her life. She couldn't stop. Blake crushed her to his shoulder. Men often shrink from hysterical women, but he did not. With his other hand, he stroked her hair. His warm breath soothed her forehead. Her tears soaked his neck and his linen shirt. Taking deep breaths, she finally stopped the sobs. Unable to speak, she could only gasp. She expected Blake to be angry with her. She deserved a vicious scolding. Instead, he was kind and helpful.

Her protector leaned closer, his face inches from hers. His eyes slowly closed. His lips slid across hers. She opened her mouth to welcome his tongue.

Comfort. He wants to comfort me. Make me feel better. Enchant me until all my worries subside. Long enough for me to compose myself and think clearly.

Composing herself was not possible. Blake's hand slid down her back. She enjoyed the length of his kiss, the flavor and touch of his tongue. His hand caressed her bottom, sending tingles everywhere. As he nuzzled his nose against her neck, he flipped open the top three buttons of her morning dress. While she oohed and aahed, his lips explored her collarbone. She seemed to float through the

air, her troubles falling to the earth below. *Please keep on kissing me until I'm strong enough to deal with whatever comes next.*

Blake rubbed his teeth along her neck. He spread nipping kisses along the edge of her ear. She wanted to do this all afternoon and into the evening.

He raised his head. With his right hand, he yanked a cotton handkerchief from his inside jacket pocket. She took it and dabbed at his neck and collar. Then she swept the cloth across her eyes, blew her nose, and wiped her chin.

She picked up the letter. "I am so sorry. This is the worst thing I've ever done. I've been so thoughtless of others. Especially toward you."

He squeezed her shoulder. "I know how you got yourself into this mess. An exciting impulse possessed you. It was crazy and dangerous but irresistible. In the past, I've succumbed to that urge far too often. To my regret, the consequences were sometimes as grave as yours. You are right. We are too much alike."

"I've tried to reform," she said. "Stephen is helping me."

Blake grinned. "And I have encouraged

your baser nature.”

She pointed to the words of the letter. “This isn’t your fault. I set this in motion before you rescued me from our broken carriage.”

“Enough of feeling sorry for yourself,” he said.

“I am not feeling sorry.” Yes, she was. Pity gave her an excuse to avoid finding a solution. “I am apologizing.”

“Apology accepted. Now, what are you going to do about this?”

“Me? I don’t know,” she wailed. “Don’t you have some ideas?”

Blake said nothing. He didn’t even look like he was thinking hard.

He expects me to choose a plan? “We could make up an amusing story,” she said. “The kidnapping was an elaborate joke. Or a misunderstanding. Like we did when I almost knocked Lord Byron off his feet.”

“That time, you told the truth. This is more serious,” Blake said. “Dan Durgan may attest to this blackmailer’s version of events. Whatever you say will reflect badly on your father. People will think he suggested the ransom scheme. Given the possible marriage contract and your strong-willed . . .”

“Stubbornness. Unthinking passion.”

“Keep going,” Blake urged.

“My wrongheaded, misguided, selfish, mutton-headed . . .”

“Enough adjectives for the time being. Inform me immediately when the next missive comes.”

“How can I do that?”

“For the next few days, I will arrive early every morning.”

“How will you thwart him?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“I must be with you at the rendezvous.”

“Stephen and I will capture the man, perhaps with help from the little boy. Then we will dispatch the dastardly fellow.”

“Dispatch? By what method?”

“Don’t concern yourself with his welfare. Stephen and I will make sure he never troubles you or anyone else again.”

Her heart fluttered. She had to stay calm enough to continue this conversation. No more crying or wailing or, as he said, feeling sorry for herself. “You plan to kill him?”

“Cassie, this is beyond your realm.”

“I created this realm. I am responsible for what happens to this terrible man.”

“Extortion is a hanging offence.”

She didn't want the man dead. For the rest of her life, his demise would haunt her. "Criminals rarely hang unless they do something extreme or they refuse to give up their criminal careers. His crime is merely attempted blackmail. Could you 'dispatch him' without killing him?"

"I can think of a few possibilities."

Blake jumped to his feet. He headed for a tall, wide pine tree. As he circled the tree, his boots crunched on the dry pine needles. From past observation, Cassie knew he needed to wander while he mulled over a decision. He was wonderful. She could think of no other man who would forgive a woman who tried to steal six hundred pounds from him. Not just forgive her, he wanted to court her.

He rounded the tree and came to a halt. "A severe beating by thugs intent on robbery. Rescued by a Good Samaritan, namely myself. A disembodied voice, probably Stephen's, warning him to change his ways or other calamities will befall. That scenario requires a darkened woods with the hint of specters swirling among the trees."

"Will that scare him off?"

Blake returned to circumnavigating the tree. This time he went around twice, once to

the left and a reverse to the right. This odd method seemed to work for him.

“Cutting off small body parts,” he offered.

“How awful.” She was in no position to argue. “Which parts?”

“A finger. A toe. The tip of his nose. An ear lobe.”

“All of them?”

“No, just one, but we threaten to remove other appendages if he causes more trouble.”

“He could still be a problem.”

To Cassie, deciding if a man should be killed, beaten or mutilated seemed like a fantasy. But her situation was real. She had caused this dilemma, and only she could solve it.

He headed back around the pine tree. This time, she joined him.

“A nipple,” Blake said. “That’s my first choice.”

“No!” she almost shouted. Her brain flipped from despair to giddiness. “Isn’t there some permanent solution that isn’t so gruesome? What about kidnapping him and selling him to a ship’s captain in need of a crew member? You have friends in the military.”

Blake squared his shoulders. “Since our

experience of 'impressing' English born sailors from American ships during the recent dustup across the Atlantic, the British Admiralty no longer forces men into the Naval Service."

She took another tack. "Maybe not the Admiralty. Just some merchant ship."

"The blackmailer would return on a future voyage, determined to cause more trouble." His eyes widened. His mouth formed a silent "O". "I know a way. Combine an unplanned sea voyage with selling him into indentured servitude."

Cassie clapped her hands with glee. "Australia."

"Kangaroos and koalas," he said.

She giggled. "Boomerangs and didgeridoo."

~ ~ ~

Two days later, the sweet little boy returned. Early morning, Cassie found him waiting on the front porch. Her aunt, uncle, and father were still abed.

"Would you like some breakfast?" she asked.

The lad thrust a new letter at her. Her breathing stopped. Sucking in air to calm herself, she slipped the paper in her pocket

and escorted him to the kitchen. He climbed up on a chair.

“You must say nothing about these letters to my aunt,” Cassie warned. “Or to anyone else who lives here.”

He nodded vigorously. Then he stared, his mouth ajar as she placed before him thick slices of bread, a jar of jam, leftover sliced ham sprinkled with raisins, a bowl of canned peaches in syrup and, of course, a large mug of milk.

“I told my ma about helping you. She said I could.”

He tucked the napkin into the top of his shirt, one of his old ragged ones, and ate with both hands.

While he feasted, Cassie opened the letter. She steeled herself not to react to the words.

The same author had written:

You got my 50 pounds? I can't wait no more. Take what you got. At six o'clock this night, come alone to Cold Harbour Woods. It's down the road from the school at Low Burrow House. Go to the SW corner of Camberwell Lane. Find the willow tree out back. When I see you alone, I will call out where to stand. Tell the boy what brought this yes or no you will come. If you bring the law, others will spread the story I have to tell. Be there

or be sorry.

Blake could find this place south of London across the Thames. The area was mostly farmland. Cassie held herself so stiff her back began to ache. Trying not to think about the possible outcome, she did what she must. Whatever happened tonight, this would not be an adventure. Someone could be killed or injured. If the worst occurred, she hoped she was the only victim.

The boy stopped eating. "More bad news?"

"The man writes I am to tell you 'yes'. You can remember that easily enough."

"Yes," he repeated.

Aunt Patience walked through the doorway. She patted the boy's head. "Fried eggs for you, child."

As her aunt stirred the fire, Cassie stuffed the letter into her dressing robe pocket. She carried eggs from the icebox to the stove.

Aunt Patience melted butter in the frying pan. "Fried eggs for all of us."

Not once looking at Cassie, her aunt chatted with the boy, saying she found more clothes in his size. Busy eating, he kept saying "thank you." As if memorizing the simple word, he also said "yes" as often as he could.

They ate in silence. The fried eggs didn't

travel easily to Cassie's knotted stomach. She heard the door knocker. She leaped up and ran to the foyer. Blake and Stephen stood on the porch.

"Come in," she said. "Aunt Pat is frying eggs."

Stomping their boots free of dust, the men followed her to the kitchen. She tried to break more eggs, but her hands shook too hard. Blake came up behind her. He laced his hands around her waist and poked around in her pockets. He slid the letter out. The paper disappeared inside his jacket.

"I need to use the facilities." He motioned to Stephen. "Keep me company, old boy."

The two men bolted out the back door and headed for a water closet near the hedgerow.

Aunt Patience stared at Cassie. "Someday, will you explain any of this to me?"

Cassie twisted her fingers together. "Probably not."

She glanced at the little boy. He devoured his food with fingers, spoon, and tongue.

Her aunt tilted her head, motioning Cassie to come closer. "Blake and Stephen are in this escapade with you?"

Cassie nodded. "Most likely, we will leave early afternoon and be gone until late."

“In public?” With every word, her voice rose in pitch. “Unchaperoned with two men?”

“Not in public.” Hoping her two swains would return quickly, Cassie glanced out the kitchen window. “You could help us.”

“Why would I agree to such scandal?”

Calmer now, Cassie handed her another egg. “We will save this dear child from the evil man who often makes him work all night. The man also extorts money from the boy’s hardworking mother.”

“Your motives are admirable.” Aunt Pat’s flat monotone implied either she didn’t believe Cassie or she had more questions. “Why must you accompany Blake and Stephen? Given their world of experience, they can deal with this villain without your help.”

“I have to come along.” She looked around. With the boy eating and the men in the yard, she was on her own. “You remember I told you I did something foolish and dangerous? I have to settle the problem in person.”

“With this evil man?”

Cassie looked at the boy. His teeth purple with blackberry jam, he smiled at her.

“The very same.”

“How can I help?” she said.

Cassie's heart thumped so hard in her chest her limbs went weak. She had just recruited her aunt to help with her desperate problem. If she kept her life simple and her heart pure, she would never again have to consider the consequences. Today would be her last adventure.

Cassie set her part of the plan in motion. "Tell my father that you and I are going shopping and we will return after supper. While you shop, pretend to look for me. Insist I was with you just a minute earlier."

"How will I explain your absence this evening?"

"I don't know. Do you have any ideas?"

"We all have invitations to the Wiltons's rout. The event begins early. Eight o'clock, I believe. I'll make sure our group arrives later. There will be a mob of people. Music and poetry recitals. Conversation and cards. People milling around from room to room. Indoors and out. After you three eliminate the evil man, how soon could you and Stephen appear at the rout?"

Their rendezvous with the devil was at six. How long would they need to capture the man, take him to the docks, drop off the boy at his home, for Cassie to change into a gown

and Stephen into evening attire, and ride to Mayfair?

“Midnight,” she said. “Maybe sooner.”

“At the Wiltons, Syd and I will tell your father we’ve seen you, even talked to you. Grace and James are so beguiled with each other, sometimes I have trouble finding them at these soirees. Often, they’re holding hands on a balcony or hiding among the shrubbery doing who knows what.”

“Thank you,” Cassie gushed. “We also need a picnic basket with a cold supper. I’ll need a satchel for my evening clothes. I can wear my breeches under my skirt.”

“Blake and Stephen will be with you every minute?”

“Me too,” the little boy said. Eyes wide, he put his hand over his mouth. How much had he heard?

Aunt Patience smiled at him. “I know you like my niece, but you won’t be coming with us.”

He hopped down from his chair and put his arms up to hug Cassie. When she leaned down, he whispered, “That bad man is taking me along tonight. I can help you.”

She kissed him on the cheek. He didn’t wipe the wetness from his face. Tonight, this

child could be hurt. *Oh, my God, what have I set in motion?*

A moment later, Blake burst through the back door. "I heard you're making fried eggs."

Stephen followed him.

"We are," Aunt Patience said. "How do you like yours? Over easy, scrambled, or sunny side up?"

He gave her a hug. His agitated movements meant he was excited and happy. "Any way you make 'em is fine with me."

On the other side of the large walnut table, Stephen pulled up a chair. Blake sat beside Cassie. His knee nudged hers. He slipped her the letter. As he did so, he caressed her robe-covered thigh.

He spoke softly in Cassie's ear. "Can you invent something so your Aunt will let you be gone all afternoon and evening?"

"She's agreed to help me. I will share the details with you later."

Cassie kept her eyes locked on her aunt. Giving her a chance to talk to Blake, her aunt lingered over the eggs crackling in hot butter. So long as Aunt Pat promised never to tell anyone, Cassie vowed to someday tell her the whole truth.

"The little boy will be with the blackmailer

this evening,” Cassie said to Blake. “You must keep him safe.”

He glanced across the table. “Young man, would you pass me the butter?”

The little boy grinned, revealing a healthy mouth full of teeth. “Yes, sire. Yes, yes, yes.”

Chapter 15

The Willow Tree

After Blake and Stephen left to make arrangements, Cassie walked the boy upstairs to his “bedroom”.

On the landing, he took her hand and pulled her down to his level. “The bad man wants me to meet him at four o’clock.”

Back in the kitchen, Cassie helped Aunt Patience fill a picnic basket with provisions for supper and snacks. Blake’s enthusiasm relieved her fear somewhat. Today, they would be on a righteous mission, carried out by the two most courageous men she knew, three if she counted the little boy.

She dashed upstairs to change into breeches, a simple muslin blouse, and an embroidered capelet. Aunt Pat followed close behind. To wear over her riding pants, they found the loosest skirt in Cassie’s wardrobe. Patience rifled through the closet until she found a dark green Empire ball gown. It had the least amount of ruffles and frills. Her aunt

seemed excited to help with their adventure. Did Cassie inherit her daring nature from her favorite aunt?

Three hours later, Blake returned. Over a quick lunch, he explained he'd found a willing sea captain on the Pimlico docks. Stephen, he said, was completing the transaction.

After he rode off on Valor, Cassie and her aunt hired a hackney to take them to Oxford Street. At each shop, they talked to clerks and shopkeepers about gloves and handkerchiefs, jewelry and hair pomade. They even dickered with some for better prices.

At two o'clock, the chimes of Westminster Abbey pealed. Aunt Patience hustled Cassie to her rendezvous with Blake. The two women waited until the sidewalk was clear of shoppers. Facing the street, Aunt Patience stood at the entrance to the alley. Cassie slipped around behind her.

In the dark, narrow passageway, the pungent aroma of smoked sausage and the grassy smell of horse manure tickled her nose. Other less pleasant odors also attacked her senses. Picking her way among boxes and crates, cans of trash, and items she cared not to identify, she searched for solid footing in the gravel covered mud. Satisfied no one could

see her, she rested her satchel on a barrel. She unbuttoned her skirt, pulled it off over her head, shoved the material in with her ball gown, and took out a man's cap. Hastily, she twined her hair into a loose braid, then pulled the cap down over her ears.

An arm reached around her neck. A hand covered her mouth. Hoping the man was not a street thief, Cassie forced herself to remain still.

Blake growled in her ear. "Would you like to take a ride in the country?"

Her mouth dry, she nodded.

Minutes later, Cassie, Stephen, and Blake trotted their horses down Piccadilly Road. Both men were armed; two pistols each plus an assortment of blades from pocket knives to daggers. Blake carried a coil of rope.

So as not to attract attention, they slowed to a leisurely pace. As they entered Saint James Park, Cassie asked, "What are your plans for our rendezvous?"

Blake said, "We can't make a plan until we see the lay of the land. Your correspondent insists you meet him at dusk. He'll make sure he faces east so the glare of the setting sun will be in your eyes. Later, the full moon may be to our advantage."

With the lake to their right, they traveled through the tree-rimmed park.

“Stephen,” she said. “You are entitled to know why I need your assistance.”

“Blake asked for my help. In matters such as these, I trust his judgement.”

“I want to tell you.”

Blake grabbed Cassie’s hand. “He doesn’t need to know about your earlier scheme. Don’t embarrass me any further.”

“Embarrass?” Stephen straightened in his saddle. “Now I most definitely want to hear why we are travelling to a secret meeting in response to a stranger’s letter.” He sidled his horse close to Cassie’s. “Do tell.”

She said to Blake, “He is risking his life.”

Her tall gallant glared at her. “No, no, no. None of us will be in danger. We will capture the fiend and deliver him to the ship docked at Pimlico. A simple maneuver.”

Stephen spoke up. “Blake wouldn’t let me read the letter you received this morning. Does the man in question demand payment for blackmail?” He wiggled his eyebrows at Cassie. His lips chewed on a smile. “It can’t be because you owe money because your father’s debtors have repaid what they owe. You can’t be in trouble with the law. Mmm. Knowing

you, perhaps you can. Plead guilty, pay the fine and pay off the magistrate. That should settle the affair.”

“Blackmail, it is,” she said.

“Of yourself or your father?”

“Myself.”

“My dear, what have you done?” She had hoped for his sympathy. Instead, Stephen sounded intrigued. “Especially dwell on whatever aspect is an embarrassment for Blake.”

At those words, Blake dropped her hand and rode out ahead.

With him out of earshot, Cassie laid out her attempted crime and the reason she needed the ransom money. She bounced on through meeting her present blackmailer who connected her with the Gentleman Bandit Dan Durgan, on through Blake pretending to be her kidnapper, and his kindness in hiding the truth from the rest of the world.

Inch by inch, Stephen’s jaw dropped. “I have known you a mere two months, but I thought I understood you. I stand corrected. You are . . .”

Cassie hoped he would say “amazing”, but he failed to provide an adjective.

In apology, she said, “You have helped me

correct the errors of my outlandish behavior.”

“Not enough, I fear.”

“I set this scheme in motion before I met you.”

Condemnation filled Stephen’s voice. “You never considered the Gentleman Bandit might be miffed when you cheated him out of his share of the ransom?”

She had not. Stephen took the reins and struck her horse’s flank. They galloped ahead to catch up with Blake.

“Dear friend,” Stephen said, “you asked me to squire about a woman who tried to extort six hundred pounds from you?”

His mouth twitching, Blake looked straight ahead. “At the last minute, she changed her mind.”

“If she had been kidnapped by the real outlaw, he would not have released her from the scheme. At the least, he would have demanded his fifty pounds bounty.”

Blake finally looked at him. “She wasn’t kidnapped. To learn more of her plan, I kept pretending to be the outlaw. As you know, I fell under her spell.”

Sweet words for his feelings for her. Similar to her own for him. Blake could be spellbinding. Cassie knew their conversation

wasn't about her.

Stephen strained to keep up with Blake's pace. "The woman could have changed her mind and tried to rob me. She is dangerous. She conspired with a kidnapper."

Blake glowered at his friend. "If you want out, turn your horse around and flee back to Mayfair. I'm taking Cassie to Cold Harbour Woods."

Chin raised, Stephen said, "I am a man of my word. But your deceit relieves me of part of my obligation to you."

"You mean for saving your life?"

"Twice," Stephen corrected. "No matter how this turns out, today's adventure marks paid the time you rescued me from being thrown off a cliff."

"This escapade won't be nearly that dangerous." Blake mused. "I'll cede saving you from the fire."

Stephen winked at Cassie.

That settled, they rode on. In case they met anyone who engaged them in conversation, Blake would say they were brothers. They would claim Cassie, or whatever masculine name she chose to call herself, suffered from some contagious disease. They were traveling to the healing mineral

springs near Brixton.

After forty minutes in the saddle, they crossed Westminster Bridge. South of the Thames River, the road passed through a small town before opening onto fields of wheat, cows munching in pastures, and tidy farmhouses. Blake said he knew the area. A few miles later, they came to a three story manor house with outbuildings behind. On acres of grass, boys played at cricket and lawn tennis.

Blake drew to a halt. "I attended school over there. Loughborough House Academy for Young Gentlemen."

"What did you study?" Cassie asked.

"Not much of anything. Expelled after six months." He patted Valor's neck. "Several schools had previously asked me to leave. I read books, but I detest sitting in a classroom while some gentleman natters on. Too much to see and do outdoors."

"You missed your home and your family," she said.

"I did. Noble families send their sons away to school at too young an age. I never completed classes anywhere until I graduated from Sandhurst."

The military academy. If he knew Stephen

from school, where did they study together?

After her guilty admission, Cassie couldn't gauge if Stephen felt differently toward her. He had used his "outrage" to extract a concession from Blake.

A mile or so south, the road passed through a narrow forest. These woodlands were probably set aside for the tenants to collect firewood. Among the trees stood small farmhouses. The last house showed signs of a recent fire; roof caved in, burnt walls, the yard littered with debris.

At the crossroads, arrow-shaped signs pointed toward Stockwell to the west and Brixton to the east. Another sign read CAMBERWELL LANE. Up that road, a farm wagon came toward them. In the other direction, two men tried to herd an enormous hog back to his pen.

Blake said, "The houses we just passed are the Cold Harbour settlement. How can we walk into the woods without looking suspicious?"

Cassie pulled the cap off her head and uncoiled her braid. "We are having a picnic in the woods."

"Since you are accompanied by two gentlemen," he said, "you must act like a girl

of questionable repute.”

She shook out her braid and ran her hands through her hair. “Is this alluring enough?”

He grinned. “Shake your hips when you walk.”

She did, and his grin turned to a toothy smile.

No fence separated the forest from the hay fields. Grass and weeds grew dense under the trees. To escort her through the thicket, her gentlemen friends each took an arm. Several yards back, they came to a large weeping willow. The trailing branches created a space on the ground about forty feet across. With less sunlight, the undergrowth here was sparse.

While she lingered at the foot of the tree, Stephen and Blake walked the area. To pace off distances, Blake took exaggerated steps. Pencil in hand, Stephen copied his friend’s words in a small notebook.

Cassie looked up through the waving fronds. When they arrived, birds had scattered. Now they fluttered onto branches, chirping about the distress these strangers could cause them. As the breeze moved the branches, she noticed something too light in color to be part of the tree. An animal? A scar

on a branch? Or had something been dragged up there? She scanned the ground looking for evidence of boot prints, broken twigs, or flattened vegetation. She found none.

Cassie caught up with Blake and Stephen who lounged behind the willow. In the shade, the humid air was cooler. Most of the trees were oak. A few were pine. The thick underbrush beyond the willow meant this part of the woods saw little traffic.

Blake took charge. "We need to tether the horses where they won't be seen or heard." The men settled on a place behind the burned-out house. They tied the three horses loose enough for them to drink from a shallow creek.

Tromping down some of the underbrush, Cassie shook out a red-checkered tablecloth. From the picnic basket, she lifted out jars of pickled beets, olives, a plate of sliced ham, and a basket of bread. The men made sandwiches. She chose to use a fork and a small plate.

Blake leaned back against a sapling. Stephen sat cross-legged beside her.

"Lovely day for a picnic," she said.

Stephen drew out his pocket watch. "The hour is ten past four. We must vacate these

premises by no later than five.”

As they continued to eat, Stephen took the notebook from his pocket. “Advantages to the blackmailer.”

Blake ticked them off with his fingers. “He is a vicious brute deeply involved in criminal activity. He must know this area well. With darkness coming if he escapes capture, he could cover a good distance before we take him. He may have a hideout nearby.”

Since she was to blame, Cassie offered her opinion. “The blackmailer believes you and Stephen know nothing about my kidnapping scheme. He won’t expect you to be with me. And who else could I possibly convince to come along?”

Stephen wrote down her suggestion.

“What disadvantages did you two think of?” she said.

Blake began again. “The man works nights, so he sleeps days. That’s why he is meeting the boy at four o’clock. From London, it will take him an hour or more to get here. He won’t know we arrived before him.”

This must be how Blake planned battle strategies.

Cassie said, “He should see me ride up. I’ll tie my horse near the lane, look about

furtively, and walk to the willow. If you need to chase him, my horse will be near at hand.”

As the men discussed strategies and options, Cassie considered all that could go wrong. The blackmailer would be armed. The little boy would be with him.

Stephen licked the tip of his pencil. “The man is not experienced with blackmail. He chose a spot easy to find. Usually, a victim is instructed to go to one location. There he finds a note spiked to a tree with further instructions. After several stops, the poor fellow arrives at the final destination.”

Taking her turn, Cassie said, “The fiend doesn’t know the boy wants to help us.”

“He’s nine,” Blake said. “He doesn’t get enough sleep or food. I doubt he can do much.”

Cassie pictured the child’s sweet smile. She heard his enthusiastic words, “Yes, I will help you. Yes, yes, yes.”

Her voice quavered at the memory. “The lad works two full-time jobs, one of those for a criminal. He’ll do anything to free his family from the man who’s terrorized them for years.”

Twisting her hands together, Cassie turned and walked away. The men could make their

plans without her. She would do whatever they told her.

Blake came up beside her. "Get yourself together."

She couldn't look at him. "Whatever goes wrong, and likely something will, I am to blame. I will suffer guilt for the rest of my life. I deserve to live in misery." Tears gathered around her eyes.

He shook her shoulders. Then he cupped her chin and shoved her face up until she had to look at him. "Stop whining. No crying allowed. Yes, this is your fault. You will help us make things right. We have the power of justice, honor, and virtue on our side. All right, except for Stephen, maybe not virtue. And military experience. This is a campaign we can win. Don't behave like a simpering ninny."

She stood before him, her eyes staring at his. *This is what taking responsibility means. Apologize for my mistake, and repair what I can. Don't complain, don't whine, and don't cry.* "Thank you for the reprimand."

As she gathered up the picnic leftovers, she composed herself. Get on with the mission. Fall apart later. "I want to show you something. Bring your spyglass."

Blake followed her to the base of the tree.

She pointed up among the leaves. "See that bit of white? It's too big to have blown up there from the ground. Also too high to be of any use to someone here below."

Blake stretched out the glass and looked through the eyepiece. "It looks like rope. Maybe tied into a net. Why would someone drag a contraption that big up there?"

Cassie tried to think like a soldier. "Before he wrote his two letters, the blackmailer studied this area. He could have climbed up there." Or sent the boy. "With your permission, I want to climb the tree and see. It may be something we can use to our advantage. We can at least be prepared for it."

From her youthful ramblings, she knew willow branches grew close enough together for easy footing and were strong enough to support her weight.

"I can attest to your agility," Blake said.

Stephen protested. "She could fall on the hard ground and scratch her face. A twig could puncture her eye."

At the trunk, Cassie put one hand on Blake's shoulder and used the other to loosen her half boot.

Stephen said, "What are you doing?"

“I can’t climb in this footwear. The soles aren’t flexible enough.”

Blake pulled off one boot, then assisted with her with the other one.

She rolled her stockings down and off. “I always climb barefoot.”

Blake nodded. “The woman has the toes of a chimpanzee. She can probably grasp an orange between her big toe and little one.”

Before Stephen could argue further, Blake boosted her to the first branch. Gauging which one to mount next, Cassie looked up through the branches. A zephyr blew through the willow fronds, not enough to unbalance her but enough to change her view. As she climbed higher, the tree swayed. Birds flapped. Squirrels chattered before they jumped out of her way. About twenty feet from the ground, Cassie reached the branch where the contraption lay. She knew how to climb a tree but not how to slide out on a branch. Such was the purview of birds, chipmunks, squirrels, and the odd bat.

Using her teeth, she skinned off each glove and let them drop to the ground. For fear of growing dizzy, she dared not look below. She slid down to sit on the branch. Up here, the breeze blew stronger. A few willow fronds

slapped her face. She hugged the branch, but her grip slipped a little. With her free hand, she reached toward the white ropes up ahead. She swung one leg to the other side of the branch. She lay on her stomach and inched along the bark. Nubs of twigs tore her blouse. She had no idea how she would find her way back to the trunk let alone down to the ground.

How might my obituary read? Damsel falls to earth from high in a willow tree. Did she suffer from unrequited love? Was she collecting eggs from the nest of some rare bird? Had she been spying on someone?

By inches, Cassie slipped and scooted until she reached the ropes. Stronger than a fisherman's net, it looked big enough to snare a large animal. Gripping the branch until her fingers ached, she squinted down through the leaves. If this net were dropped at a signal, the ropes would brush against the leaves. It looked heavy enough to break past the branches. The net would land on whoever stood below. If the blackmailer ordered her to stand in a certain spot, the net would knock her to the ground. He could wrap the ropes around her so she couldn't escape.

When I meet the kidnapper beneath this tree,

he will signal someone to drop this net. He's not threatening blackmail. He wants to capture me and collect the original 600 pounds ransom. That's why he's bringing the little boy. He said, "I'm a good climber. I never fell once." The child can shinny up a drainpipe and climb fences, but how much experience could he have climbing trees? The poorer neighborhoods had no trees to speak of. He's probably never visited a park. He could fall.

She stifled a sob. No whining. Get the job done. She wasn't the one who needed saving.

Chapter 16

Pockets, Monkey, and Bunny

Clutching the branch with both hands, Cassie raised up to get a better look at the net. Later in the gloom of twilight, the boy would have to loosen the two ropes wrapped around twigs.

She called out, "I'm coming down."

As she slid backward on the branch, her thick riding breeches protected her legs. She had little choice but to look way down to the ground. Both men looked up at her. They were in position to catch her if she fell.

When her backside hit the trunk, Cassie sat against the tree. Twisting her torso toward the trunk, she started to swing her leg over the branch. Just then, a breeze shook the tree.

A panicked, "Oh, no," escaped her lips. Shivering with fright, she hugged the trunk.

Be calm. Forget this is my fault, forget the little boy will be in mortal danger. Forget how many feet are between me and the ground. One inch at a time.

Back and forth, the tree rocked. Leaves beat against her arms and head. As she never had before, she listened to the wind; its fresh breath, its sighs of retreat, its murmurs fading to stillness. Satisfied, the wind was resting, Cassie moved her feet to the branch below. Once she got a footing, she slid from smaller to larger branches. She kept leeward of the trunk.

At the lowest branch, she jumped. Blake caught her. One arm under her knees, the other behind her back, he twirled her around. "My marvelous monkey, what did you find up there?"

She would like to stay safe in his arms, maybe some cuddling, a few kisses. Instead, she tapped his shoulder, and he lowered her to the ground. She rolled on her stockings, and the men pushed on her boots. They grabbed her arms and pulled her to her feet.

"Someone put a large net up there," she said. "At the blackmailer's command, I believe the boy will release the net."

"Damn," Blake swore. "The fiend means to drop the net over you. He'll take you captive and demand all the ransom money."

"Can we rush him when he arrives?" she asked.

“In the twilight, we won’t be able to see him clearly. He could escape. The boy could be hurt in the melee. The villain you described is thin and wiry. To tie you up, he’ll need a third person’s help.”

Cassie’s throat shook. She spoke barely above a whisper. “The boy could fall from the tree.”

“The boy is safer up there than here on the ground,” Blake said. “Knives. Pistols.”

Cassie said, “If you need to kill the fiend, I give you permission.”

“You want me to kill him? I am a lord after all. We nobles do pretty much whatever we please. There would be an inquiry, lots of questions I couldn’t answer. Unless we dispose of his body. Burial in some rarely visited spot. Rocks in his pockets and dumped in the river. Those options require planning.”

She shook her head. “Never mind. Do what you think is best. But I want to help.”

Craning his neck, Stephen looked up through the branches. “I see what you speak of. A spot of white.” He gathered loose stones and set them in the short grass. Then he looked up to check the location.

He moved Cassie to one side. “When you arrive at six o’clock, walk directly to these

stones. This is where he wants you to stand. I will be in the bushes behind the tree. When we hear him or his partner give the signal, I'll rush out and push him forward. At the same time, you dash to the right side. The net should fall over the blackmailer. Even if we miss the mark, Blake will come from the front to take him down."

"And his partner?"

"If the kidnapper is as hateful as the child describes, his partner will run for his life. We don't need to capture both of them."

"I can't believe I'm having this conversation," Cassie said, "but I know how to throw a knife. I also know how to fend off a man who attacks me. Samuel taught me both these arts. How can I help?"

"Really?" Blake said. "You get more interesting by the minute. Show me how you take a man down."

"I couldn't throw you because you're too tall and too strong." She turned around. "I could take down Stephen."

"No," Stephen said. "Not necessary. I take you at your word."

Blake laughed. "She must give us a demonstration. If need be, Cassie can capture the kidnapper's accomplice." Blake laced his

arm around his friend's shoulder. "This is for the good of the mission. Cover all the possibilities. You must try to capture her. Not hurt her, just tighten your arms to stop her from struggling." Softly, Blake added, "Show her she doesn't know what she's talking about."

Stephen turned to her. "Where shall I stand?"

"Not there," Blake said. "Cassie, turn your back to us. Stephen will come at you, but you won't know from which direction."

She did as instructed. Her arms relaxed, her breathing calm, she didn't listen to the men walking around. She half expected Blake would grab her instead.

Too short to be Blake but almost as powerful, two strong arms circled her stomach. Stephen caught her arms in his grip. She raised her leg, kicked him in the knee, then stomped his foot. Stephen grunted but held her tighter. She flung her head back, crashing her skull against his mouth. She sagged a little so she could bend her knees outward. Cassie jerked her arms up against his. He let go with his right arm long enough for her to spin around. She punched her fist into his chest. She didn't feel any bones crack,

but Stephen's beautiful face registered surprise, pain, and fear. As he dropped to the ground, he moaned softly.

She sat down beside him. "Stephen, I am so sorry. I avoided your stomach and appendix. Do your ribs hurt?"

He shook his head. With his knees pulled up, he rolled on his side.

"Let me help you," she said.

Still silent, he shooed her away with his hand. Cassie moved aside and let Blake attend to his friend. She'd practiced these moves with Samuel, but she had never attacked another person.

Blake talked while Stephen shook his head and gasped. Finally, he helped his friend to his feet.

"Should I apologize for causing you pain," she asked, "or would that sound like whining?"

Stephen cleared his throat. "You'll do. We don't need to protect you."

"Are you really all right?" she asked.

He ran his fingers through his tousled hair. "When my lungs fully inflate, I will be." He didn't smile at her, but he did walk normally.

Blake looked her up and down, assessing her as he might a foot soldier. "Could you kill

a man with a knife? Stab him in the stomach or gut? Twist the blade?"

"I only know how to throw a knife. I've had no lessons in stabbing people."

"I can teach you. The question is, do you have the fury to kill someone?"

"To kill this evil man? Yes, I do." *What am I saying? Can I kill someone, even someone who deserved to die?* She lifted her chin and looked into Blake's pale blue eyes. "I could kill a man who meant to hurt me or the little boy. Or you or Stephen." *Self-defense or in defense of others is not a crime. In my case, innocence would be easy to prove.*

Blake stood too close to her. His chest heaved. Sweat glistened on his cheeks. He was as excited as she was. *We are two of a kind. Fire and fire, burning each other up. But what a brilliant light we make.*

From his trouser pocket, he pulled out a six-inch jackknife. He unfolded the blade, snapped it into place, and ran his thumb lightly along the sharp edge.

She wrapped her fingers around the mother of pearl handle. "Show me."

"If I stand behind you and put my arms over yours, will you promise not to throw me to the ground?"

She turned her back to him. "I promise."

"Stephen," he called. "Do you want to be her victim again?"

"No, thank you. I'll just sit here under the tree and watch."

Blake's arms enfolded her. He slid his right hand down her arm and covered her bare wrist. "Watch but also feel what I'm doing. Don't hold the knife tight. Keep the handle loose so your muscles can work the blade in line with your target."

"What part of the man's anatomy should I aim for?"

"Whatever you can reach. Entry is easiest below his ribs."

He twisted her hand forward. He repeated the move again and again until she felt the rhythm, the heft of the blade, the line of attack.

"Let me do this while you watch," she said.

His face deadly serious, Blake nodded. He was a soldier again, a man with a mission. She repeated the stabbing motion. Again, he put his arms around her and positioned the knife in her hand. She noted his corrections. She had aimed too low and at too sharp an angle. Without his help, she performed the thrusts

the correct way.

This time he almost smiled. "Good enough for now. Show me how you stab him."

"I just did."

Blake stood in front of her. He took the knife and folded the blade into the handle. Then he returned the weapon to her. "Come at me. Thrust the handle at some tender part below my ribs. I will fight to get your weapon or knock it from your hand."

Before he got into position, she spread her feet and lunged at him. He made a feint out of reach. Gripping the closed knife, she rushed toward him. Blake grabbed her wrist and wrestled the weapon from her hand. He flipped the handle and lay the blade between her breasts.

"Try again," he said.

They went through the routine four times. Each time, her speed and aim improved. Each time, he smiled a little more. Finally, she "stabbed" him in the stomach.

He staggered in mock agony. "She has punctured me. I am a dead man. Oh foolish me for not knowing this woman believes the way to a man's heart is with a knife."

Blake plopped on the ground, fell backward, and closed his eyes.

Cassie put her booted foot in the middle of his stomach. "You are my prisoner."

"No need," he moaned. "I'm past saving. Send the burial detail."

He grabbed her ankle. Grinning, he dragged her foot across his hard stomach until she stood over him, one boot on each side of his waist. She'd learned what he wanted to teach her. Now he invited her for a lesson in sex play.

"Enough," she cried. "Stephen, what is the hour?"

"Near six o'clock. Time for us to leave. As soon as you two untangle yourselves."

No kidnapper, no accomplice, and no boy had arrived for their meeting. They retreated to the edge of the woods. Hiding in the stalks of hay, Cassie looked up Cold Harbour Road, Blake looked west on Camberwell, and Stephen looked to the east.

Blake spoke up. "We need code names."

"We do," Stephen agreed.

"What is a 'code name'?" she asked.

Stephen explained. "When you need to get the attention of others in your troop, but you don't want your enemy to know who you are, you assign nicknames. My alias is Pockets because I carry lists about with me."

She wanted to ask Stephen how he knew about military maneuvers, but maybe sporting events also used nicknames.

Blake smirked at her. "You shall be Monkey."

Stephen said, "Blake usually goes by . . ."

Cassie interrupted. "I only agree to be Monkey if Blake answers to Bunny."

His mouth frowned, but his eyes danced. "Bunny it is." Blake looked at Stephen. "I will explain her reference later. Or perhaps never."

~ ~ ~

Blake pulled his spyglass out to full length. Placing the lens over his right eye, he focused on two riders coming down the middle of Camberwell Lane. The taller man did not sit well in the saddle. The shorter one had a better seat.

He crawled back to Stephen and Cassie. "This may be them. The time is right."

On hands and knees, his two compatriots followed him to the edge of the hay field. Blake watched as the riders alit. The smaller man helped the little boy to the ground. Probably stiff from sitting so long, the child ran about. Blake couldn't hear their words, but the taller criminal seemed to be in charge.

When the boy ran past the leader, he lifted the child, swatted his rear end, and dropped him on the ground. The boy didn't protest. He just got to his feet and took hold of the smaller man's hand. As if taking the hand of a friend? That was an odd gesture for the child. The threesome wandered under the willow tree and looked up into the branches.

The kidnapper, who must be the mean one, yanked on the boy's free arm and led him to the base of the tree. He started to lift him, when the boy raised a holy fit. He jumped up and down and began bawling. *Good for you, lad. Make trouble as long as you don't get hurt. Distract him.*

The man released the boy who ran into the field. Close to the edge of the trees, Blake slithered across the ground. When he came nearer, he touched the boy's pant leg. Smart child, he didn't flinch. Instead, he squatted down.

"Hi," he said. "I told them I had to pee. And I do."

"We can talk while you tinkle. Stand up."

The boy did as told. "I'm supposed to climb up in the tree. When the man yells, I untie the cords and a net drops. On the lady."

"She climbed up the tree and found the

net.”

Wide-eyed, the boy looked down at him. “She did?”

“Have you been up in this tree before?”

“No, but I’m a good climber.” The lad shook his member before he pulled up his knickers.

Blake took the boy’s clean hand. “The lady will walk under the tree to meet the evil man. She knows where to stand so the net will fall on her. She will start to walk away, making him move to the target spot. When the man yells to you, don’t release the net.”

“I won’t.”

“When I yell . . .” The wind changes sounds at that height. The boy might not recognize Blake’s voice. “I won’t yell. I will call out your code name.”

“What’s that?”

“If you were an animal, what would you be?”

“Why?”

“That animal will be your code name.”

The boy glanced at the sunset sky. “A hawk. I want to be a hawk and fly away.”

“When you hear me yell ‘Hawk, now’, release the net so it drops on the evil man.”

“Hawk, now,” the boy repeated.

He ran down the tree line toward the men who'd brought him.

Chapter 17

The Net

Blake crawled along the edge of the field to where Cassie and Stephen waited. He repeated the instructions he'd given the boy. Stephen nodded. Cassie looked horrified but didn't argue.

Resting on his haunches, he looked through the spyglass. The kidnapper boosted the boy onto the willow's lowest branch. Because of the drooping fronds, Blake couldn't see as the boy climbed higher. Leaves rustled as squirrels scampered and birds took flight. He trained his glass on the two criminals. The taller one looked up among the branches. When he seemed satisfied the boy had reached the net, he walked about and pointed to the road. His voice grew louder though Blake still couldn't understand his words. Suddenly, the man grabbed his cohort's arm and half walked, half dragged the fellow to Camberwell Lane. There they disappeared from his view.

Blake said, "Move to your places."

He didn't want to sound like a commander giving orders to his men, but he was in charge of this field operation. His troops were a woman, a man with limited combat experience, and a nine-year-old boy. Blake was proud to be their leader. Cassie had mounted her horse and was trotting north on Cold Harbour Road. The edge of the sun touched the horizon. Careful where he stepped, Blake worked his way among the trees to the right side of the willow. Stephen had disappeared behind the tree.

Loud enough for the kidnapper to hear her, Cassie turned and galloped back, slowing only as she rounded the corner onto Camberwell Lane. Blake watched her dismount. This afternoon, he advised her to look around, tremble a bit, and take hesitant steps.

Doing as instructed, Cassie walked toward the tree.

What an admirable woman. Brave and determined. She can do almost anything a man can. There she stands under the tree, waiting to meet a man who wants to kidnap her. Even though she proved she could defend herself, he didn't want her injured. As the criminal's prize, she was the least likely to be killed. Up

in the tree, the child faced the most danger.

A disembodied voice called out. "Cassiopeia Valient. Come forward. I will direct you where to stand."

She walked toward the voice.

"Stop there. Wait."

A man walked, sauntered really, toward Cassie. In the shadows, Blake wasn't sure if the kidnapper or his accomplice approached.

In her gloved hands, Cassie clutched the leather pouch he'd given her. Wrapped and tied, it was filled with small stones.

From behind the tree, the voice again called out. "To the left. Now a step forward. Yes, there."

Stephen was behind that man though not close enough to pounce. The voice didn't come from the person walking toward Cassie. Had the coward sent his confederate?

Cassie stopped where Stephen had placed the stones. She'd been perfect up to now. But she didn't step backward to lure the accomplice beneath the net. She didn't offer him the pouch.

Blake heard Cassie say, "Hello again. Can you help us?"

He gritted his teeth. *Stay calm in battle. Slow down my thoughts so I can assess this*

change in plan.

“Bunny!” Cassie called.

She stepped backward. The man stepped toward her.

Blake jumped to his feet. He yelled, “Hawk, now. Hawk, now!”

The net fell cleanly through the branches. The man looked up. The net crashed over his head, knocking him to the ground. From the heap of ropes, Blake heard an outpouring of curses. A woman’s voice spoke those foul words.

Cassie turned toward Blake. “This isn’t the kidnapper.”

Had she forgotten everything they rehearsed, or was she making her own plan?

From far above, Blake heard a high-pitched cry. The boy shouted, “I’m stuck on a branch. Oh, no. I’m not stuck. I’m falling.”

Blake pushed Cassie aside and lunged forward. In the gathering gloom, he couldn’t see the boy, but he should fall close to where the net landed.

Blake waved his arms over his head. “Reach for me. Here.”

Head first, the boy sailed through the fronds. His arms flailed like he was trying to fly. Blake pivoted. If the child hit the ground,

he would die. The boy came into view. Blake dove to his left. The child crashed against him. Arms clutched around him, Blake fell on his back. Panting, he lay on the ground. He forgot the plan, forgot to be angry at Cassie or to wonder where Stephen had gone. All that mattered was the child in his arms.

The boy looked down at him. His voice shook as if he were near tears. "I'm a good climber. Not a good faller."

Blake hugged the child against his chest. The lad's heart pounded almost as hard as his own did. The boy held onto Blake's jacket as if expected to fall again.

"You are a good faller." Blake's voice broke into a tremor. "You fell right on top of me."

The boy glanced around. "Where is the lady?"

Blake raised his head. Cassie sat astride the kidnapper's accomplice who was a woman or maybe a girl.

That female called out. "Is Ben all right?"

He helped the boy to stand. Blake pushed himself to his feet. He assessed his own body. *No bleeding. Possible bruises. Won't know if any bones are broken until I walk around.*

"Are you Ben?" he asked.

The boy nodded.

Taking the child's hand, he walked to where Cassie sat.

"This is Ruth," she said. "Dan Durgan's daughter. A few weeks ago, we met her in Hyde Park. She wants to help us." Cassie reached her hand toward the boy. "Are you hurt?"

He pointed to Blake. "I fell on him."

Cassie looked up. "I thought to help you catch him, but I decided I might get in your way."

"You were correct." He turned around. *Not enough pain for anything to be broken.* "Pockets!" he called out.

Cassie thumped his boot. "Pockets went after the kidnapper. He chased the man west on Camberwell Lane."

The woman under Cassie gasped, "If you let me up, I'll lead you to where he's hiding."

Blake wanted to put his boot against the side of the girl's head and break her cheekbone. But Cassie wouldn't approve.

"Why should we trust you?" he snapped.

Cassie slid farther back so the woman could breathe. As he watched the ladies shift position, Blake ignored the erotic visions in his head.

Ruth said, "Miles is my father's brother. I was visiting my ma in London. Pa asked me to see what Miles was up to. When I found him, Miles told me he'd hatched this new kidnaping plan. And he was making little Ben work for him. I couldn't let him keep doing that to my nephew."

Cassie said, "Tell Lord Rayneford the entire story. He knows I engaged your father to help me extort six hundred pounds from him. Miles, as you call him, is the man I met in Nottingham to make the arrangement to be kidnapped."

Ruth blinked. "And the lord still likes you?" Her gaze traveled to Blake. "After I told my pa how you threatened to send him to the hangman and me to gaol, he gave up on the ransom scheme. Pa counted on his fifty pound share of the ransom. Yours was to be his last job. Then we were taking transport to America for a new start."

Blake helped Cassie to her feet. "We will know if she leads us into a trap."

He would leave the net behind. A farmer would be happy to find the hemp.

Ruth jumped to her feet and gave Ben a hug, which he returned. The child's endorsement looked to be a good sign.

“How far is your uncle’s hideout?” he asked.

“A half mile or so up the Lane.”

“Everyone mount up. Ben, you will ride with my lady.”

He planted his feet in front of Durgan’s daughter. Acting as menacing as he could on short notice, he stepped so close he could look down on the top of her head. She squinted up at him.

“You will ride beside me,” he said. “Tell me everything you know about where Miles went. Every approach to the place, every escape. If anything deviates from your description, you will be the culprit I deliver to the Sheriff of Surreyshire.”

When all were mounted, the girl kept pace with Blake. Cassie and Ben rode behind.

Ruth said, “There’s a cold harbour ruin out this way. You know what those are?”

“I do,” Blake said.

In early times, travelers sometimes took shelter in the stone ruins of ancient Roman villas. Those walls provided a night’s “cold harbour” for someone who couldn’t afford an inn or find a welcoming farmer. Some of these “harbours” had disappeared underground.

Ruth continued, “I’ve only visited this

place twice and not after dark. I saw two entrances, each covered by shrubs. One is a hole in the ground. You can jump down, and the brush covers the hole right up, but you can't climb out that way. The other entrance has stairs. The upper floors of the villa caved in ages ago. The rooms below ground are partly collapsed. But a desperate man can find space enough to hide."

"How many rooms?"

"I don't know. Miles doesn't like tight spaces. Most likely, he won't venture past the first room."

"Is he right or left-handed?"

She paused. "Right I think. Yes, he is."

"What weapons does he carry?"

"I can't say for sure, but I saw a pistol, a dagger, and a pocket knife. And a garrote to keep the lady from resisting."

Ahead, Blake saw Stephen's horse tied to a fence post. An untethered horse nibbled grass near a tree line. Blake jumped to the ground and lashed Valor's reins to a tree.

As Ruth dismounted, he said, "Help Cassie and Ben down."

Making sure his friend could hear and see him, Blake climbed to the top of a ridge.

Stephen greeted him. "I followed the fiend

this far before he disappeared. He didn't flee into the farm fields. I would have heard him trampling through the brush. I walked the ridge crest. In the twilight, I found no sign of an opening or even places where the ground had been disturbed. There may be a cave here."

"Below this ground is a cold harbour ruin," Blake said.

"Of course," Stephen said. "The settlement's name."

Blake waved for Ruth, Cassie, and Ben to join him.

When they walked up the rise, he gathered them around him. "A cornered man might surrender. However, given the darkening sky and the consequences of his capture, Miles is more apt to fight his way out." He turned to Cassie. "You stay beside the road. Keep track of the horses. Get the rope from my saddlebag. Have it ready when we bring Miles out."

She didn't protest about being left out.

The afterglow of twilight drew a pink and purple line along the horizon. A pretty picture, but no help with his vision. The moon was rising. Its light would soon prove helpful.

"Ruth," he said. "Take Ben's hand. You two will go down the stairs first. With your

steps, make enough noise to cover the tread of Pockets and myself. As you descend, call out to your uncle. Assure him we have given up and left. That no one is waiting to attack him.”

The girl took Ben’s hand and walked to a spot under a tall pine tree.

Blake followed her. “What can we expect as to the condition of the steps?”

“Large rocks on some of them. A lot of loose gravel. Going down isn’t so hard. Coming up is more difficult.”

“If you’re lying . . .”

He couldn’t see her eyes, but he heard her sigh. “Miles is the black sheep of the family. I know you think all thieves are equally vicious, but we do have standards. Miles has none. I’m trying to protect my family from him.”

Blake turned to Stephen. “If you have the chance, grab him from his right. He favors that hand. Ruth, do what you can from the left. I will attack from the front.”

Ben spoke up. “What about me?”

Blake thought to say “take cover and stay out of our way”, but this child could be useful.

“Make noise,” he said. “Holler to see if the place echoes. Complain you’re scared, though I know you aren’t. Your racket can cover our footsteps. Once we reach the floor, hide

behind the large stones.”

The boy straightened his shoulders. Blake almost expected him to salute. He glanced back at Cassie. She stood at the roadside, keeping the five horses together.

Blake surveyed the territory. Long ago, this land had been terraced. The ridge crest was too flat to be natural. The soil supported small bushes, tall grass, and wildflowers but no trees. That meant the cold harbour extended only under this open space. A few night birds trilled. An owl hooted a warning. In the distance, a dog barked but probably not at them. He saw no twinkling lights from farmhouses.

Ruth pointed to a bit of ground covered by shorter grass and weeds. Blake bent his knees. He dug his gloved fingers into the dirt until he touched wooden slats. Plants and all, he lifted each slat and laid it aside.

With the large hole uncovered, he asked, “Are we ready?”

His troops nodded.

“Ruth and Ben go first. Stephen and I will follow a step behind.”

Blake’s pulse beat faster than it should. The thumps twitched in his ears. His troops had the advantage he reminded himself. Their

prey was trapped below ground. The people the fiend trusted had betrayed him. But advantage didn't always mean success.

Depressions and cracks pitted the stairs. Small stones pushed at the soles of his boots. Eight steps down, he slid his hand over granite. The wall felt nearly intact. The opposite wall bulged inward as if any disturbance might buckle it. The place must be well ventilated because he smelled no stale or moldy odors. No animals skittered away. Apparently, none lived here. The place was too difficult to get out of. Did that mean this underground ruin had only two entrances?

Three steps further, he tapped Ruth's shoulder. She flinched but took his meaning.

"Uncle Miles," she called out. "It's me, Ruth. Cassiopeia Valient and her protectors are gone. The men released me with a warning. You are to leave her alone. If you don't, the lord and his friend will kill you, dump you in a pond, and throw rocks on top."

The girl has a fine imagination. Miles didn't answer.

He whispered, "Now, Ben."

Using all of Blake's suggestions, Ben yelled, moaned, howled, cried, and hooted. His voice echoed off the stone walls. He was

picking up small stones and throwing them into the room.

Blake had been in night battles with poor visibility. Sometimes the field was on fire and smoke filled his lungs. But he never fought in a confined space with only one exit. He had protected children, but not ones he knew. Sliding his hands down the walls, he took deep breaths. He couldn't think of the danger. He must only think of the mission.

On each new step, he swiped his boot across the one below. Before stepping down, he kicked debris out of the way. Light sprinkled on the floor below. The moon must be streaming through a crevice.

Ruth kept trying to coax her uncle out of hiding. Ben yelled almost non-stop, saying he was scared or hungry or he couldn't see. What a good soldier that boy was.

After three more stairs, Ruth's footsteps changed. She must have reached the floor. Blake followed. After a thousand years or more, the foundation had shifted. The floor tilted downward a few inches. Ruth and Ben walked to the middle of the space. A few feet beyond, Blake dimly saw a pile of large broken stones. The barricade reached higher than his head.

A bright flash. An explosion. A gunshot came from above the pile of stones.

Ruth screamed.

Blake grabbed Ben and pushed him partway up the stairs. "Stay here. Yell like the bullet hit you."

Yowling, the boy curled against the wall.

Blake couldn't let Miles reload. A soldier could push in a ball and add shot in a few seconds, though not as fast in the dark.

Ruth cried, "You hit Ben. If you shoot again, you could kill me."

Blake knew where the shot came from. He crept around the pile of stones until he found an opening. He bent over to fit through the narrow entrance. The man could be anywhere. With the moonlight behind him, Miles would see Blake first.

He dropped to his knees and crawled across the floor. Stephen touched his arm. His friend was crouched for an attack. Blake looked up. Still not responding to Ruth's entreaties and Ben's racket, the fiend lay prone across the top of the stone pile. He peered into the front part of the room.

Blake whispered, "Left leg."

Stephen answered, "Yes, sir. Say when."

Breath steady, ready for battle, Blake

clutched his dagger. The two men rose to their feet. In three long strides, they reached the stones. Blake lifted his left hand.

Each man lunged forward, grabbed a leg, and bounced the gunman down to the floor. Blake shoved his knee into the villain's back. Stephen wrestled the pistol from the man's hand. Squirming and kicking, Miles screamed in pain. Blake rolled his victim over. The man twisted his head trying to bite him. With his hands, Blake pinned the man's shoulders to the floor. Stephen sat on his legs. While there, he rifled the villain's pockets and came up with a dirk, a pocket knife, some coins, and the garrote.

Miles gasped, "I got friends who will tell the truth. You don't know how that woman tried to rob you."

Blake jerked him to his feet. He squeezed the man's wrists together so Stephen could tie them with the garrote. Miles squirmed and shuffled his feet. Was he dumb enough to try to kick them? Blake stomped his boot on Miles's foot. The man howled in pain.

Enough of this tomfoolery. "I am a professional soldier," Blake said. "Right this minute, I can kill you and convince the authorities you died by misadventure. Of

course, you will take some time to die. The coroner will rule you fell down those stairs. Sadly, you were impaled on your own knife. Picture the funeral your friends will throw for you. Kegs of whiskey. Remembering the good times when they stirred up mayhem with their friend Miles. That is, if anyone ever finds your body.” He looked at Stephen. “Pockets, shall we begin?”

Miles went limp. He sniffled like he might burst into tears. All cowards do.

“I won’t fight you anymore,” the man whined. “Just take me to the Sheriff. I’ll admit to all my other crimes. You don’t want me to admit to this one, do you?”

Chapter 18

A Night's Ride

When she saw Ruth and Ben running down the hill, Cassie rushed to greet them. She'd heard Ben shouting and then a gunshot. After that, a mix of shouts and feet tramping. She was afraid to think of what might be happening. She hugged the boy, then held him away to inspect for injuries, scratches and bruises. The moon cast enough light to see his face. He looked so serious. Cassie brushed granite dust from his clothes. She straightened his hair and hugged him again. He didn't push her away. He just leaned his head on her shoulder.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He nodded. "Miles is caught."

Over the boy's head, she saw Blake and Stephen walking toward her. All those who had ventured into unknown danger were safe. She wanted to grab the four of them into one enormous hug, but her arms weren't wide enough.

Each of her protectors gripped one of the kidnapper's arms. The man stumbled down the hill. He cursed his bad luck and mumbled his life would soon be over at the end of a hangman's noose. Cassie started to say she would spare him the fate he deserved, but Blake frowned. Had he changed his mind?

She hurried back to the horses and pulled the coil of rope from Blake's saddlebag. The two men tied Miles's feet together. Then they slung him over Valor's rump and used more rope to keep him from falling off.

While Stephen stood guard over their prisoner, Blake joined Ben and the women. He asked Ruth, "Can you find your way home from here?"

"I can. You have done our family a service. Though he is blood kin, Miles deserves to hang. But my pa will be heartbroken."

Cassie said, "Your uncle is not going to hang." She glanced at Blake. He lifted his chin and looked down the Lane.

"You're taking him to the Sheriff," Ruth said. "We haven't the blunt to buy him out of a death sentence."

Blake spoke up. "Cassie is a kind-hearted woman. She doesn't want your uncle killed or even injured. I would gladly have done either.

Since this entire episode is her fault . . .”

Cassie stopped him. “Since I set everything in motion, I get to choose the punishment. Blake has arranged a long sea voyage for your uncle. He will never return to England.”

Ruth gasped. “He’s to be thrown overboard in the middle of ocean? Eaten by sharks?”

Cassie touched the woman’s arm. “Nothing so horrible. Miles will work for his keep. When he arrives at his destination, the captain will sell his ‘indenture’ to the highest bidder. Fourteen years service, didn’t you say?”

Blake shuffled his feet.

Ruth laughed. “Miles has rarely worked at anything that’s legal. Will he be going where they speak English?”

Cassie smiled.

“America?”

“Farther,” Cassie said.

“Oh, that will be dandy. Thank you. This disastrous evening has turned out much better than I expected.”

Cassie noted Ruth’s language skills had dramatically improved. She spoke like a proper gentlewoman.

Blake helped Ruth onto one horse and handed her the reins to the other one. “Can you handle both animals?”

“This horse is mine. I will return the other to the stable where Miles stole him. If I hurry, I can get this horse back into his stall before the groom discovers he’s missing. You’ll make sure Ben gets home?”

Cassie nodded.

As Ruth rode away, Cassie turned to the men and the boy. Would this ever be over? No whining. Just the honest truth. Her rash behavior had endangered all of them. But she had freed Ben and his family from the evil Miles.

Blake counted coins into Ben’s hand. Checking for holes, the boy pulled his pocket inside out. Then he shoved the cloth back in his knickers and slipped in the coins.

She took Blake’s arm. “Thank you for paying him.”

“Stephen found the coins in Miles’s pockets. For all he did to help us, the boy deserves more payment than this.” In the moonlight, he held up his pocket watch. “Seven-fifteen. We must deliver our captive to the docks, return Ben to his home, get you and Stephen dressed, and escort you both to the Wiltons’s rout.”

Her evening had just begun.

While they rode, Cassie held Ben in her

lap. She heard his stomach growl. Miles had not provided supper. Holding the boy and the reins with one hand, she reached around for the picnic basket.

“Would you like some ham?”

Eagerly, the boy snatched the slices from her and devoured them. Then he ate everything else she offered.

Stephen handed her his canteen. With both hands, the boy held up the flask. He gulped water until it trickled over his face and down his neck.

After wiping him chin with his shirttail, Ben nestled his head against her shoulder. “You don’t have to take me home. Just drop me off across the river. I can find my way.”

If this child disappeared, she would never see him again. Aunt Patience would be disappointed. Cassie’s heart tugged. She didn’t want to give him up either. She wanted to treat him like a little brother, protect him, provide for him, love him, and take care of him the rest of her life. Rescuing him and his family from Miles wasn’t enough. She must find out where he lived.

“Which corner shall we drop you off?” Her words tasted like bile.

“Anyplace is fine.” Was she imagining, or

did he sound like he might miss her too?

“Not just anyplace, Ben. My name is Cassie. I want to help you and your family. So does my Aunt. To do so, you must show us where you live. Miles is going far away. He will never bother you again.” Did Miles have friends or fellow thieves, who would continue to harass Ben’s family? If so, she definitely needed to know the boy’s address.

He settled back against her shoulder. “If I take you to my house, don’t tell my ma I fell out of the tree. You can tell her all the other stuff I did. But not falling.”

“We won’t tell her. She would be upset thinking of Blake catching you.”

“Blake is Bunny?”

She had let his name slip out. Exhausted from all she’d done since early this morning, she still had more to do. “Never tell anyone Blake’s code name is Bunny.”

“What about Pockets?” he asked.

She laughed. “I don’t think he minds. So, will you let us deliver you safely to your mother and make a plan for you to visit us again?”

“Before ma will let you in, I have to ask her first. Then you have to tell her where you sent Miles. She won’t believe me if I say we

put him on a ship to . . .” He paused. “Where is he going?”

“To the other side of the world,” Cassie said.

“Where’s that?”

“The land is called Australia.” She experienced a moment of sympathy for the residents of that continent.

“Can he walk back from there?”

“Oh, no. Australia is thousands of miles from here. The whole place is surrounded by oceans.”

“That’s good. I helped.”

“We couldn’t have captured him without you.”

His arm around her waist went limp. His head lolled on her neck. He was asleep.

Cassie was just as sleepy. To keep from dozing off, she shook her head. In spite of blinking and shaking, her eyes closed. Her horse would follow the others. She would rest for a minute. Behind her eyes, she saw a baby. In her arms, she was rocking her own child. Blake sat beside her. He stroked the baby’s hand and tickled its ear. She didn’t know if she held a boy or a girl. She didn’t care. She wanted a baby. Startled, she came awake. To have a baby, she needed a husband. Stephen

would be a better choice, but Blake had invaded her dream. For now, neither of these men seemed interested in anything beyond friendship.

Within the hour, their little group crossed Westminster Bridge and headed south. At Pimlico Wharf, they paid a lascar to hold their horses. Cassie awakened Ben. They followed the men who dragged Miles to the dock. The sea captain accepted delivery of the cargo. He promised his ship would sail no later than two days hence.

When he learned he was going on an ocean voyage instead of being taken to the Sheriff, Miles let out a whoop of joy. His hands still tied, he kissed the sea captain on both cheeks and proclaimed he would be a model sailor.

Back at the horses, Blake announced the time was nine o'clock. Cassie had told her aunt she and Stephen would arrive at the rout before midnight. So far, they were on schedule. While they stretched their legs, they let the horses drink from a trough and nibble the weedy grass along the bank of the Thames.

Cassie turned to Ben. "Where to next?"

As if reconsidering his offer to introduce her to his mother, the boy walked around in a

circle. "If I show you where I live, who else will you tell?"

"No one unless you want me to. I would like to tell my Aunt. She wants to help you."

"And the men won't tell either?"

Cassie took his hands in hers. "They won't. Have any of us lied to you or done you harm? Do you trust us?"

"I have to. You're sure Miles is gone for good?"

"We have the ship captain's word. He's been paid generously."

Ben dropped her hands and crossed his arms. "We live in Knightsbridge. On Charles Street off the High Road. The man my ma works for runs the butcher shop out front."

Cassie gave him a hug. "Thank you. Blake knows how to get there. If he misses a turn, you can correct him."

Their party headed to the Knightsbridge section of West London. The area had a checkered past and a less than savory present. Blake said he knew Ben's street. She didn't ask why he'd been there before. They rode up Piccadilly Road. Rows of fine townhouses graced the street. When they turned south onto High Street, the scenery changed. Sprinkled among proper establishments such

as theaters and restaurants, the gaslights brightened gaming dens, brothels, taverns, and opium parlors. Cassie hugged Ben closer to her. He came awake, eager to give the signal for the next turn.

When the boy called out “Charles Street”, Blake led them into a lane. Small houses, some with shops out front, lined the street. A few blocks down, Ben told them to stop in front of McGonagill’s Butcher Shop.

Blake pulled Valor beside Cassie and the boy. “Can we stop where we won’t be seen?”

“Come into the alley,” Ben said. The boy directed them down the dirt alley to a two-story house behind the shop. Cassie smelled animal blood from the slaughter pen in the yard. They tied their horses to a falling down fence.

Ben said, “Only the lady can come inside. If you all come, my ma will make a racket and have you thrown out. Even if she don’t, someone will steal your horses.”

Blake gripped the boy’s shoulders. “Cassie must be kept safe.”

Ben said, “I will take care of her.”

She patted the head of her little protector. Blake slipped his dagger into her hand. She secreted the weapon in her pants pocket. “I’ll

be fine.”

Ben unlatched the back gate and led her through. “Don’t say nothin’. I gotta explain to her first. I told Ma some about you.”

Cassie followed him down the graveled walkway. At the house, she helped him pull open the slanted cellar door.

Ben said, “Mostly, I go in through the window, but you won’t fit.”

They walked down the rough stone steps. Ben went first and rapped on the door. “It’s me, Ma. Let me in.”

He waited. Cassie wondered if his mother was asleep. Finally, the door creaked open.

A woman stood in the sliver of light. “Ben, what are you about? We can’t be havin’ company.”

“This is the lady I took the letters to. The one I helped. That man who takes your money and makes me work for him, his name is Miles. He’s going away to . . .” He looked up at Cassie. “Where again?”

“The far side of the world,” she said. “Australia. No longer will he torment your family. Less than an hour ago, we turned him over to a sea captain on Pimlico dock. I have two gentlemen out back who will confirm what I say.”

The woman opened the door a few inches wider. "Ben, get in here. Thank you, ma'am."

As she started to close the door, Cassie pushed against the handle. The two women struggled until Cassie won. She shoved the door open and let herself in. Ben followed. With moonbeams streaming through two small windows, Cassie made out a table with mismatched chairs, a crib, a bed, and something that might be a settee. She heard a child cry. Ben's mother went to the crib and picked up a blanket-covered bundle.

Then she returned to Cassie. "What do you want? We've got nothin'. If you did as you say, sent Miles Fitzhenry far away, we're that grateful to you. But you have no business here."

"Yes, I do," Cassie said. "I am not leaving until you hear me out."

The woman sighed loudly. The bundle stirred. This must be Ben's little sister. "Make no noise. My employers sleep on the second floor, but I ain't allowed visitors, most especial not in the middle of the night. Ben, you get to bed."

"Not yet," Cassie insisted. "He must hear what I have to say. He can testify that I tell you the truth."

The woman unwrapped the little girl and set her on the floor. Then she lit two candles on the table. This light reached only a few feet, but Cassie saw a good-sized room which served as kitchen, bedroom, parlor, and all else to this family of three. Ben's mother pointed Cassie to a chair. The girl, about three or so, stood up, walked to her mother, and put out her arms. The woman picked up her daughter. Ben stood next to Cassie.

"We are all very fond of Ben," Cassie began. "You have raised a wonderful child. He is resourceful and brave and hard working. And sweet and lovable. My aunt is quite fond of him. She gave him her son's castoff clothes. We would like to help your family."

"Why?" The woman bit off the word.

"Because Ben helped us. We couldn't have captured Miles without him."

"Give us some coin. That's enough."

Ben dove into his pocket and pulled out the money Blake had given him. He laid the coins on the table. His mother stacked them by value and counted the total.

"Thank you. Good-bye now."

"Not yet. Ben told us your employer pays you very little. The butcher makes your nine-year-old son work long hours at no pay.

Perhaps my aunt can help you find a better situation. More money. Nicer quarters.”

Though spacious, the room was a cellar. Cassie smelled the stale aroma of mold and the dampness of sweaty stone walls. On blustery days, the wind must howl through cracks in the masonry.

“Upstairs, I get all my work done,” the woman said. “If I don’t have to pay Miles, I’ll have enough for my children. And this room is fine.”

“I know you want a better life for these sweet darlings.”

In the gloom, the woman squinted. “When you rich folks offer us help, you always want somethin’ back. We’re not givin’ you nothin’. You will be leavin’ now.”

“Please,” Cassie said. “Ben brought me letters from Miles who wished to do me harm. Ben climbed up a tree. A tall tree.” The boy stiffened. “At a signal from my friend, he released a net which fell on Miles’s accomplice. Then we chased him. Miles escaped into a cold harbour ruin. Ben went down the stairs first. He hollered up a storm so the two men could sneak up on Miles. The fiend fired his pistol at Ben. Luckily, he missed. Ben risked his life. He did exactly

what he was told to do. He wasn't afraid. He's proud of helping us. Why shouldn't we rich folks be allowed to thank you? And why won't you let us?" Cassie took a breath. She had said too much. But all her words were true.

The woman caressed her son's cheek. "Boy, tell me what you think."

Ben put his arm around his mother's back. "We could do better than live here. Her aunt fed me and gave me clothes and let me sleep in her bedroom. We should find out what they can do for us."

The woman rubbed her cheek against her son's forehead. Then she glowered at Cassie. "What do we have to do?"

"On your day off, come visit my aunt. She'll want to know more about you. She has many friends in Mayfair. If she recommends your services, one of her friends may hire you."

"I have to live in," the mother said. "I have no one to watch little Charlotte while I'm working."

"My aunt will find an employer who offers room and board. She might even pay a tutor to teach Ben to read. He's a smart lad. Your daughter too when she's older."

"And you want nothin' from us?"

“Ma’am, we rich people don’t deserve to be rich. And you poor people don’t deserve to be poor. The world is not fair. Sometimes we gentry feel guilty. Helping you will make us feel less guilty.”

Her eyes still narrowed, the woman said, “I trust my Ben. If he says yes, I say yes.”

Cassie spoke the wrong words in the wrong tone of voice, but Ben had made his mother believe her message.

“What is your name?” Cassie asked.

“Beatrice Fitzhenry.”

“Miles is a relative?”

“On my husband’s side. Not mine.”

So Dan Durgan’s real name was Fitzhenry. Any English name that began with “Fitz” meant noble blood, often the offspring of a king or prince. Sadly, the first “Fitz” of each family had been born on “the wrong side of the blanket” and was thus illegitimate. What a family.

“Ruth Fitzhenry was with Miles tonight. She is Ben’s aunt?”

The woman’s lips pressed tight together. “My husband’s sister.”

“Why haven’t you asked Dan Durgan for money? He’s your children’s grandfather. Surely he can spare something to help you.”

“I want no connection with their stolen money. Even if I did, I don’t know where they live. How could I find them?”

“How indeed.”

Cassie remembered she and Stephen must attend the Wiltons’s rout. Among all of today’s planning, no one had discussed where she would change clothes.

“Could I ask you for a favor?”

“Like what?”

“I need to change into a ball gown, arrange my hair, and put on some jewelry so I can attend a soiree in Mayfair.”

“Right now?” The woman laughed. “You rich people.”

“I know. I must convince my father that I have been shopping all day and partying all evening instead of running off to Cold Harbour to catch a criminal, to Pimlico dock to send him away, and to Knightsbridge to drop off a fine little boy.”

“Where’s your clothes?” Beatrice asked.

“With my friends in the alley.”

“They can’t come in, but I will help you into your dress and do something with your hair. You have quite a tangle there. Ben, go bring in the lady’s satchel.”

Chapter 19

A Talk with Her Father

Cassie liked Beatrice. The woman was right to ask questions about an offer too good to be true. When Ben returned with the satchel, Beatrice sent him to bed. She warned him to cover his head with a blanket and not listen to anything they said.

Ben's mother lay Charlotte in her crib and led Cassie to the rear wall. In near darkness, Cassie slid out of her blouse. She pulled off her boots and breeches until she wore only her drawers and chemise. All those clothes were slightly damp. From climbing, riding, and attacking people, she had shed some sweat.

Beatrice oohed and aahed as she helped pull the Empire dress over Cassie's head. She buttoned up the back and pulled the bodice in place. Then she tried to stretch the wrinkles out of the skirt.

"Hand me your hairbrush," the woman said. "Do you have anything to hold your hair in place?"

In her satchel, Cassie found two tortoise shell combs. A little roughly, Beatrice stroked the brush through Cassie's hair, twisted her unruly mane into a knot, slid in the combs, and pulled out a tendril beside each of Cassie's ears.

"I have no mirror," she said. "Ask the men in the alley how your hair looks."

Cassie patted around her head. Every hair fell perfectly in place. "Thank you."

"Give me your necklace." Beatrice fastened the pearls around her neck, then screwed on Cassie's diamond earrings. "You are like Cinderella."

Cassie buttoned on her capelet and pulled on her silk gloves. "And you are my fairy godmother."

"Off to the ball."

"There will be no dancing. We're going to a rout."

"Ah, well. If you can, send a message of when we might visit your aunt."

Cassie sat on a chair while she put on her stockings, garters and slippers. "In two days, send Ben to visit my aunt near supper time. He can tell us your day off. We will feed and clothe him and offer him a comfortable night's sleep. When he returns home, he will tell you

the best time to visit.” Cassie suspected Beatrice also could not read.

The woman wrung her hands. “I’m afraid to hope. I’ve been let down before. So has Ben. But if he trusts you, then you must be a good person.”

Before Cassie left by the creaking door, she gave the woman a hug.

Walking on gravel in dancing shoes was harder than in boots. In the alley, she joined her swains. “Gentlemen, you will have to help me into the saddle.”

Each man chose a side and hoisted her into the seat. She arranged herself sidesaddle.

“Time’s wasting,” Blake said. “We can be at the Wiltons in twenty minutes.”

Stephen had already changed into his evening wear.

“Don’t splash through puddles,” she said. “I’ll have enough to explain without mud spots on my dress.”

Blake galloped them out Piccadilly and along Hyde Park. Gas lamps weren’t installed on these streets yet. Few people were about. Those they saw didn’t seem to care that three people on horseback, one in a ball gown, were racing up their street.

When they reached Mayfair, Blake slowed

the horses to a trot. "What took you so long before you sent Ben to get your clothes?"

"I told his mother we want to help her. She didn't trust me. So I said we rich people relieve our guilt by sometimes helping the poor."

"I don't feel guilty," he said.

"You should. Ben is better off than most poor children. He doesn't live on an orphan farm or sleep in the streets. He has a little sister Charlotte about three-years-old. What would become of these children if their mother took sick or died? City children have so little protection. You're in the House of Lords. Do you attend sessions?"

"I sit in when they discuss the military budget."

"How often does Parliament vote to create better jobs for the city's poor or help those who can't take care of themselves? Do you discuss keeping farmers on their land or raising prices so they can feed their families?" She was breathless from talking and riding at the same time.

"Mostly in Lords we discuss our looney King and his wastrel son. My cohorts also discuss how the government can tax the gentry more so the nobles pay less. And how

to suppress the Socialists and Anarchists. Revolution is in the air. First the Americans, then the French. Greece possibly next. We're Lords. We aren't supposed to care about anyone but ourselves."

She heard a touch of irony in his remarks. She knew he wasn't as selfish as he sounded.

Cassie said, "I want my father to run for Parliament and win. I want to donate money to charities that help poor children. And I want to help Ben's mother find better employment so her family won't have to live in a cellar and Ben won't have to work. I don't know how to accomplish the first two, but with Aunt Patience's help, I intend to reach my third goal."

Now, on to the Wiltons's rout where rich people will act rich. What a life I lead.

True to his word within twenty minutes, Blake led them into the alley behind the Wilton Mansion on Berkeley Square. To keep her hair and gown undisturbed, the men helped her to the ground. She and Stephen couldn't enter through the front door because their late arrival would be announced.

Across the back of the property, Blake paced the length of the eight-foot-high stone wall. Listening for dogs, he put his ear near

the wrought iron gates. Through the mansion's open windows and doors, Cassie heard voices, music, and assorted hubbub.

Near the corner, Blake found a metal gate not more than six feet high. When he motioned, she and Stephen hurried to join him.

"Over you go," Blake said.

Stephen stripped off his jacket and tossed it over the fence. Blake boosted his friend up until he had one knee on the gate's curved top. Using the wall for support, Stephen pulled himself over the gate and dove head first toward the flagstone path below. Before crashing to earth, he righted himself, sprang to his feet, brushed off his trousers, and shrugged into his jacket. Cassie gaped amazed at his acrobatic dexterity.

"Your turn, Cassie," her taller suitor said.

"I, uh, really?"

"Do you have a better idea? Right now, your father is on the prowl. Aunt Patience can't forever convince him that she's recently talked to you."

"Spikes decorate the top of this gate. I am wearing a dress." Cassie started to add that she was a girl, but she had bragged she could do anything a man could.

“Small spikes. Not sharp enough to penetrate your skin.” Exposing far more than her ankles, Blake lifted the hem of her gown. He handed her the bunched cloth. “No pantalets?”

“Just drawers,” she said.

Blake grabbed her hips. He lifted her over his head and settled her on his shoulders. Only her drawers, which covered her hips, buttocks, and lower front, separated her unmentionable parts from the nape of his neck. Her bare thighs rested on his shoulders. Her legs dangled over his chest. What if someone saw them?

Blake fondled her slippered feet. “Lean as far forward as you can. Stephen will catch you on the other side.”

*How many adventures so far this evening?
Will I break my skull on the flagstone? Do I have
any other choice?*

Cassie grabbed two spikes. Her breasts caressed the top of Blake’s head, another sensation he must be enjoying. He slid his hands along her inner thighs. He lingered longer than he should. Then he squeezed her bare flesh and lifted her up. Waves of ecstasy exploded in the area just above his hands. He wasn’t wearing gloves! She tried to ignore

dreams of his hands moving to her breasts or around to her backside. She shook her head so hard she almost undid her hairdo.

Cassie tried to remember what she should do next. She hoped Blake was doing the same. Head first, he tossed her over the gate. She sailed through the air into Stephen's arms, nearly knocking him off his feet. He staggered as he lowered her to the ground. Getting her footing, she smoothed her gown over her vibrating thighs.

"We will act as if we have been enjoying the garden," Stephen said. "Then we will enter through some door that opens onto the terrace." He pointed. "There's one behind that fountain."

Finally, her mouth resumed working. "Do you think anyone else watched as Blake propelled me over the gate?"

"From the alley, we were out of sight of the house. From this side, we are away from the social rooms. You know I will never reveal what I saw."

"And Blake?"

Stephen laughed. "For the rest of his life, he will remember you sitting on his shoulders followed by tossing you through the air."

"That's enough," she cried.

“For all his rough talk, Blake is a gentleman. He will keep your secret. And now we must endure what’s left of this evening.”

Stephen escorted her up the steps to the terrace and through the open door. In the ornate side room, couples played cards at small tables. The impression of Blake’s hands on her bare limbs lingered. She too would savor the memory for many years and reveal this adventure to no one.

As they walked across the room, she smiled at everyone, waved to no one in particular, and chatted with Stephen.

In the ballroom, people gathered in various sized groups. The background music, a string quartet in one corner, a pianoforte in another, and a mix of instruments wafting in from the dining room, created a near deafening buzz.

She asked, “How do we locate the rest of our party?”

“Using a military metaphor, let us reconnoiter.”

“Not military,” she insisted. “I’ve been through enough battle maneuvers for one evening.”

“What I mean is, the Willoughbys and the lovebirds are advanced in years.” Through the

crush, Stephen guided her toward small doorways along the front wall. "They prefer to sit rather than stand and to do so on comfortable furniture. Some of them no longer hear as well as they once did, so a quieter space appeals to them. They avoid spritely breezes, drafts, and the occasional damp of open windows and outside doors."

Cassie said, "I see. We need to survey interior rooms furnished with high back chairs and long deep sofas. Along with side tables for their drinks and *hors d'oeuvres*. Let's try the middle door."

Cassie turned the knob and walked in. Her three relatives plus Blake's mother looked up. Almost in unison, they stood. Grace smiled, her father frowned, Aunt Pat looked about furtively, and Uncle Syd took a swig of his drink.

"There you are," Cassie called out. "Have you been hiding in here? We were outside searching the garden for you. Does anyone know when late supper will be served?"

Aunt Pat hurried to her niece. "Cassie and Stephen, I told them I had just seen you." Then she whispered, "Supper has already been served. Cake will follow later."

"Now we've found you," Cassie said, "we'll

be off. We want to hear the string quartet.”

Her father came up beside her. “I want to talk to you.”

She licked her upper lip. To stall for time, she licked the lower one, too. Was her dress askew? Or her hair? “Right now? We were going to . . .”

“Where’s Blake?” her father asked.

“I don’t know what he’s doing this evening. Is he here?” She hoped he hadn’t scaled the gate to join the party.

“We have things to discuss later,” he said.

She’d never seen her father look so stern. Lips pressed together, eyes narrowed, cheeks pulled in. Was he upset? Angry? Aunt Pat wouldn’t reveal what she knew about today and tonight’s events. But he wasn’t as distracted by Grace as his sister thought.

“Later,” she said. “I promise.” She took Stephen’s arm. “Shall we go?”

He patted her hand. “We shall stay. Come sit with me on the settee. We can enjoy the music from here.”

An hour later, having eaten cake, ice cream, and chocolate truffles and engaged in as little conversation as possible, Cassie swallowed a series of yawns. The rout was breaking up. Now she would have to answer

her father's questions.

"We all came in one carriage," he said. "With the addition of you and Sir Stephen, we will need to hire a hackney."

Feeling like a coward, Cassie said, "Stephen and I can share the hackney."

"Stephen," her father said. "Please procure us a cab. The drivers are lined up out front in hopes of picking up fares."

Stephen went on ahead.

Her father took her arm. "Busy day?"

"Quite full."

He hustled her down the front stairs and out to the hackney Stephen had hired. Her father helped her inside and gave orders to the driver.

"What about . . .?" She started to ask, but she knew the answer. Stephen would ride with Grace and the Willoughbys. She and her father would be the only passengers in this cab. The route to their lodgings would take as long as he needed.

"I know you did not go shopping with your aunt this afternoon," he said.

"I did for a while."

"This evening, I know she didn't lay eyes on you until about half past ten when you walked in on our group. I know two horses

have been missing from the stable all day. One is Blake's horse Valor."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have a good reason for what I did. For what we did."

"Cassie, I have allowed you every freedom. I let you do more than any father ought to tolerate. Sometimes your actions had dire outcomes. We faced them together. I have always defended and protected you. But I do not like being lied to. Or flimflammed. I resent you involving my sister and those two fine young gentlemen. You owe us all more respect than you showed today."

Cassie let out her breath. How much should she tell him? How much would the truth hurt him? "This time is different. To protect others, I can't tell you the whole story. Some time ago, I made a disastrous decision, which turned out badly. Today and this evening, the three of us set things right."

"That is not an answer," he said.

Her father had never spoken to her like this. He didn't blame himself for not being a strict father. As he should have done many times in the past, he blamed her.

Cassie said, "If I told you the reason, you would be upset."

"I am already upset."

“You would be hurt.”

“I am that also.”

Her voice choking, she said, “Please give me your sympathy. Some time ago, I engaged in criminal activity. I canceled the transaction before I carried it out. Since then I have reaped the whirlwind. This evening, we captured a vicious man who threatened me. Did you meet the boy Aunt Pat invited to spend the night?”

“What does this day’s events have to do with that child?”

“His name is Ben. He brought me a letter from the evil man.” The words poured from her mouth. *Just tell him about today. Maybe that much will satisfy him for now.* “I asked the boy if he would help us. The evil man extorts money from his mother and forces the child to help with his crimes. We captured the man. Blake arranged for his transport to Australia where he will be indentured.” She started to add they had rid England of a vicious criminal, but her father looked like his sympathy was in short supply.

“What did the letter say?” he asked.

“He threatened to tell all he knew unless I paid him.”

“Why didn’t you ask me for help?”

She saw the pain on his face. She had not trusted him with the truth. Worse, she hadn't let him protect her.

"I'm sorry. I got myself into this. I didn't want to disappoint you."

"Don't soft soap me," he said. "What did the man threaten?"

"To tell the world a story that would hurt you and Blake. And myself, though I deserve scorn for my actions. He wanted more than blackmail. He wanted to kidnap me for ransom."

"Are you making this up?" he demanded.

"No. Tonight, Blake, Stephen, and I and little Ben and a woman who is related to the evil man all worked together. Someday, I will tell you the whole truth. Please don't ask me to do so now."

"Blackmail? Ransom?" he cried. "You initiated a crime? My God, what have you turned into?"

What had she indeed. Never again, never again. The words rang through her head. *No matter how righteous the cause, I promise I will never have another adventure.*

"The evil man will not return. The few people who know the whole story will not repeat it. Including you. I promise to never

embark on another adventure. Other than this one time, I've never done anything criminal before." Cassie didn't have time to review her life for an overlooked misdemeanor or two. "If I ever get another urge to be outrageous, I will tell you, and you can remind me of my previous disasters."

In silence, her father frowned.

"Give me until the Season is over," she begged. "Let me decide if I want to marry someone. And find out if anyone wants to marry me. Then I will tell you the entire story. You'll be hurt, but I will have done my duty as your daughter."

"I take back what I often say about giving you too much leeway. I've never condoned illegal dealings."

"I know." Stop whining, Blake had told her, and no crying. "I also know you love me in spite of what I've done."

He took both her hands in his. "You are my child. Your mother's child. The strange one. The challenging one. Our first. Oh, Cassie, after what you just told me, I am so afraid for you."

His love surrounded her. "I'm safe. Blake and Stephen take care of me."

"Your Aunt Patience. She knows the whole

story?”

“No. She wanted to help me and little Ben. She trusted me.” Her words sounded like she was criticizing her father. She didn’t mean them to.

“I love you, Cassie,” he said. “I would like to trust you. When you tell me the entire story, I will again.”

Chapter 20

Passion

The next morning, Cassie slept late. The pendulum clock struck eleven, startling her awake. Voices came from below stairs. She heard Blake arguing with Aunt Patience. Before he invaded her boudoir as he had once before, she threw back the coverlet and dressed quickly. By the time he bounded up the stairs two at a time, she opened the door to greet him.

Aunt Pat tramped right behind him. "If you set foot in her room, so help me . . . Oh, there you are Cassie. We are going up to the sunroom to discuss yesterday's events."

As he headed for the third floor, Blake barely glanced at Cassie. She followed them up the stairs. Her aunt opened two windows, which slanted outward. Rain bounced off the glass and slid down the outside of the house. Cassie dropped into a misshapen chair. Blake pulled up a stool beside her.

Aunt Pat sat on a trunk. "My dear niece, is

your maidenhead intact?"

Cassie's mouth popped open. "I beg your pardon?"

Blake intervened. "As far as I know, yes, it is. Stephen will vouch for the same."

"Excellent," Aunt Pat said.

Too stunned to find words, Cassie supposed her aunt had the right to ask, but did she really need Blake for confirmation?

"If so," her aunt said, "I am curtailing my duties as chaperone. Though not in every instance. The three of you have worn me out. Yesterday was the worst. I want an accounting of your escapade along with the outcome for that sweet child."

Hands on his knees, Blake leaned forward. "Let me summarize as much as you are allowed to know."

With considerable exaggeration, he described their adventures at the willow tree, his and Stephen's capture of the villain at the cold harbour ruin, delivering the man to a sea captain, and Cassie's visit to the Fitzhenry household.

"And you, Cassie?" Aunt Pat said. "What did you tell your father while you rode back here after the rout?"

"What did he say?" Cassie asked.

“Nothing. Not one word. He was silent. And your father is almost never silent.”

Should she cobble up more lies, or tell her aunt the truth? Enough of fabricating, she chose the truth. “I told him as much as I told you. Why I was in trouble and how Blake and Stephen helped me solve my dilemma. I promised to never do anything rash and unthinking again. He was upset when I told him I’d engaged in criminal conduct.”

“Criminal conduct?” Wide-eyed, her aunt’s mouth fell open. “When?”

Had she left that detail out? “In the beginning. What started all this was illegal.”

“You said you were in trouble. You had done something foolish.”

“Sorry. I failed to mention that if I had continued, I would have committed a crime. However, I cancelled the plan in time to escape prosecution.”

“Good Lord.” Her aunt patted Blake’s knee. “And I’m not referring to you, dear boy. Though shipping that awful man to Australia must also be illegal.”

Blake squeezed her aunt’s hand. “I am a British lord. We can get away with anything.”

“Cassie does not have the same protection.”

“Other than being a witness, she did nothing criminal last night.”

“I was an accomplice,” Cassie said. “We believe I am now safe from further problems.” Part of her didn’t believe that claim. The Gentleman Bandit and his daughter knew about her crime. Ruth seemed to be on Cassie’s side, but what about the girl’s father? She and her swains had banished the outlaw’s brother.

Aunt Pat said, “The little boy, you say his name is Ben?”

“Ben Fitzhenry,” Cassie said. “He has a little sister. I talked to his mother Beatrice. In fact, she helped me dress and arranged my hair for the rout. The people she works for pay her almost nothing. She does everything for them; cleaning, laundry, ironing, mending, fine needlework, tending their small children, carrying in firewood as well as dressing and hairstyling for the woman.” Beatrice hadn’t outlined her duties, but if she worked all the time, she must be doing almost everything in the household. She certainly knew how to dress a woman’s hair.

“She sounds too good to be true,” Aunt Pat said.

“Do you know anyone who might hire

her? She has to keep her children nearby, especially her three-year-old daughter, Charlotte. Beatrice needs an employer who provides lodging for her and the children. That may be why she hasn't found other work."

"Are you suggesting Syd and I should hire her? Cassie, you know we chose not to have live-in help. We value our privacy. We don't want gossip to leave the house. Though at the moment, I am in desperate need of a maid who understands what dusting and polishing means, doesn't steal, and is clean about herself."

"Do you know anyone else who might hire her?"

"I shall make inquiries."

"If you did hire her, little Ben would be here every day."

"Don't sweet talk me, you imp. You know nothing about this woman. She let that evil man force Ben to work for him."

"She had no choice. The man's niece, who helped us capture him, said her uncle obeys no rules. He is the black sheep of an already notorious family."

"Before I can recommend Ben's mother to my friends, I must interview her."

"I may have overstepped," Cassie said,

“but I invited Ben to return two days hence for supper. I said he could stay the night. You can ask him about his family.”

“You did over promise. However, I found some toys he will enjoy. Now, I am going downstairs. I have preparations to make for Thursday’s luncheon.”

“What about Thursday?” Cassie asked.

“Didn’t your father tell you?”

“Blake,” Aunt Pat said. “Do you know why your mother wants me to host a cold buffet for your family and ours? And this without any servants present.”

He slouched against the wall. “I came today to ask you the same. Something is going on. Mother is no longer giddy. She is serious. Lydia smiles a lot. Little Elizabeth is twitchy. James seems dazed. And that was before his talk with Cassie last night.”

“We will find out in three days’ time. If I go below, I trust you two will behave.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Blake said. “We almost always do.”

The wind changed. Rain sprinkled at them through the open window. Cassie changed the angle of the pane.

Blake said, “I thought your father always blamed himself when you did something

wild.”

“I lost his sympathy when I told him I committed a crime but wouldn’t give him the particulars. He vowed to always love me, but for the time being, he doesn’t trust me. I misled him. I would like to tell him everything, but . . .”

“Please, not yet,” Blake said. “Though my mother knows nothing about your scheme, my covering up your ransom plan would reflect badly on her.”

Cassie looked out the window. Thunder rolled from the west. Whistling wind twisted the leaves and tore some free. She’d always believed the wind exercised the trees, as if they danced without moving their feet.

Close to her, Blake leaned against the wall. “Storms excite you. Which can make you rather frightening.”

She let herself smile. “I’m still agitated by yesterday’s adventure. The danger. The thrill. I tried not to get excited, but I couldn’t resist.”

He stroked her fingers. “What we did yesterday was noble and necessary. Being thrilled by doing good deeds is admirable. You helped yourself and protected Ben and his family.”

“If I were a man, what I did yesterday

would make a great story to tell at my club. You and Stephen were the real heroes, but I could brag that I helped. Next would come lots of toasts and back slapping.”

“How many men’s clubs have you visited?” he asked.

“Don’t disappoint me by saying after a few drinks, the members fall asleep in their chairs.”

“Would you prefer to be a man? Often enough, you dress like one.”

She thought about turning to face him, but as usual, he stood too close. “Men can do so many things a woman can’t.”

“You’ve found ways to be like us.”

“I don’t want to be a man. I’m getting better at being a woman. With Stephen’s help, I appreciate the value of being thoughtful and careful. But danger still attracts me. So does mischief.”

He stroked his fingertips over her palm. Oddly, his gesture made her want to lick her lips.

“Do you know the most dangerous adventure you can have?”

She could guess. Kissing, fondling, taking off some of your clothes or all of them. Touching places a woman would be

embarrassed to touch herself. And the final act. The Latin word *coitus* was nicer than the vulgar English word. Until now, she'd avoided such wanton adventure. In spite of the cool damp air coming in through the window, just thinking about the Latin word made warmth course from her center outward to her skin.

"When you returned from the war . . ."

"When the Duke sent me home from the war still in progress," he corrected.

"Your mother said after you returned, you gave yourself over to pursuing women. Was that because you love danger? You could have been trapped into marriage or had to pay off some offended father. Or been challenged to a duel by some woman's husband. Or caught a disease."

"I wasn't that reckless. All the women were willing. Some were eager. Widows mostly. A few married women waiting for a divorce. We gave each other pleasure."

"Sex isn't really dangerous." She pretended to be a man again. In truth, she lacked the most basic knowledge of the sex act. "Most of the participants find it enjoyable."

He moved so close his shoulder brushed her bare arm. He murmured, "The danger is caring too much for the woman. Not being

able to leave her.”

Falling in love. There the danger lies. He can't be in love with me. He would have given me some clue.

“Before you returned from the war, you weren't in the habit of chasing women?”

“I didn't have the time. Can we talk about something else?”

“You brought this up,” she said.

“I was offering advice, not reviewing my behavior.”

Since we met, has Blake given up bedding other women? His evenings are free. But I dare not ask.

“What about the other rash behavior your mother outlined? Drinking to excess.”

“Wild parties. Wild women. The liquor flowed, and others applauded while I made a fool of myself. But I never drank much. Others just thought I did.”

“Which led to bedrooms and the rest.” She must ask Aunt Pat about how “the rest” was carried out.

“Sometimes. You've observed my talent for courting a woman. I have little experience and no skill.”

He tiptoed his fingers up her arm. When he reached her elbow, she grabbed his

wandering digits. She asked, "What other dangerous escapades terrified your mother?"

"I accepted dares I thought I could win. Scale a sheer wall, eat live worms, convince a woman to share my cab, hold my breath under water for some length of time. Boxing matches. Arm wrestling. Horse racing, though never with Valor. What else? After the war ended, I bet I could swim the Channel between Dover and Calais."

"You swam the English Channel?"

"Didn't quite reach the far shore. A few miles from the French beach, my friends hauled me into their boat. Too cold. My lips were blue, and I was shivering too hard to go on."

She patted his arm. "I would bet on you."

"I'd like to try again. My most dangerous adventures were at dueling."

"You challenged men to duels?"

"I didn't mean to. I offended some men so badly they felt compelled to call me out. I never killed a man in a duel. Wounded some who deserved a scratch or two. I always let them get off the first shot."

"Were you ever wounded in those shooting contests?"

"Nothing serious. I quit the sport. The

thrill wasn't worth the gamble that my mother and sister would have to nurse me back to health."

Or would have to bury you. Was he so unhappy he wanted to end his life? With a shudder, Cassie folded that thought away.

"Did your adventures make you feel better?"

"While I was having them, yes. When they were over, I felt just as bad as before. You can't make yourself happy with adventures. Which means I can't solve my problem."

She started to ask the nature of his problem, but his secret was buried deep. Something to do with never being seriously wounded in battle.

"I trust you, Cassie," he said.

"Thank you." Something more must be coming. She waited for him to speak, then promised to be careful how she reacted.

"I did all those reckless things so I wouldn't have to go to sleep. I tried to get so tired I fell into a dreamless stupor."

"Nightmares of battles?"

He stared across the room at nothing. "The noises of battle, cannons booming, gunshots exploding, the clash of swords and bayonets, men shouting, all those sounds used to spur

me to action. Hearing the noise in my sleep sounds different. I stand on the field, my men dying around me. I don't move. I do nothing to help them. To save them."

Cassie put her arms around his waist. She spread kisses across his cheeks and chin.

He held her loosely. "Thank you."

"How about a hug?"

Blake lifted her off her feet and half danced, half stomped around the room.

When he put her down, she said, "You're not doing those foolish things any more, are you?"

"You keep me so busy, I have no time to muse on my bruised feelings. You are a tonic for me."

Good news. No dares, no duels, and other than herself, no wild women. How did Blake affect her? He aggravated, embarrassed, challenged, excited, intrigued, and upset her. He was the most exciting man she'd ever met. He invaded her daytime thoughts and trespassed in her dreams. Barely touching her, he set off sensations she couldn't control.

Her passion for him was speeding toward danger.



At a late lunch in the Willoughby kitchen, Cassie sat beside Blake. She passed him platters of food and made small talk. He remained silent. After the meal, he took his leave. She helped Aunt Pat clear the dishes.

As Cassie covered the leftover food with napkins, her aunt asked, "After I went downstairs, what else went on in the sunroom?"

"We talked."

"I heard foot stomping."

Cassie laughed. "All the way down here? Blake insisted on dancing. He is a noisy dancer."

"I shouldn't ask what your intentions are, or his for that matter, but I'm avid to know."

They had finished rinsing the dishes, soaking the pots, and putting the food in the pantry.

Cassie led her aunt to the breakfast nook. "I have no intentions. As far as I know, Blake doesn't either. May I ask you some questions? My mother died before she could give me the answers."

"My dear ask away. I was a girl myself, and I have three married daughters."

Since childhood, Cassie had been curious about sex. "Blake said the most dangerous

adventure is surrendering to passion.” He had talked about falling in love. For Cassie, that included sex. “In spite of my adventurous nature, sexual desire never tempted me.”

“Until you met Blake?” her aunt asked.

Oh yes. Like a runaway carriage. Like a flock of birds trying to outrun a storm. “I’ve been kissed before, waltzed around a few times. Some hugs, some hand holding. I slapped any boy or man who tried much more.”

“Have you slapped Blake?”

As their former chaperone, her aunt had the right to know. “A few times I should have. Last night for one. Not only do I enjoy the sensations he brings me, I savored them afterward. I’ve seen animals do it, so I know how the sex act works.”

Aunt Pat clutched Cassie’s shoulder. “I beg your pardon? Animals?”

Startled, she answered, “At River’s Leap, I help my father with the livestock. Horses, cows, sheep. I don’t know the method chickens use.”

Her aunt tsk-tsked. “We humans do not cavort like animals. A man does not sneak up on a woman and mount her from the rear.”

“Oh,” Cassie said. “Then how do we . . .?”

“You don’t need that information until you

are at least engaged.”

Aunt Pat started to stand up, but Cassie pulled on her arm. “I could ask Blake, but he would want to show me. I could ask Stephen, but he would be embarrassed. How about Grace?”

“All right.” Her aunt plopped down on the bench. “I will tell you about married couples. Most people have sex face to face. First, the man asks permission in some fashion. His invitation can be anything from sex-laced words to wiggling his eyebrows. Regardless of men’s marital rights, a woman can say, ‘No’. If he persists, she can make herself so stiff and distant he can’t pleasure himself. A wise man, or a persistent one, makes various gestures until the woman wants what he wants.”

“He fluffs the pillows? Puts more logs on the fire?”

Aunt Pat laughed. Cassie sensed her aunt enjoyed her memories. Maybe she and Uncle Syd were still doing “it”.

“The man touches the woman in such places as will make her desire match his. When she catches up, they, uh. They just do it.”

Cassie put up her hand. *Don’t say anything for a moment. I want to study the visions in my*

head and put them in chronological order. Behind her eyes, she saw sunlight streaming through tall windows. A large bed. Blake standing beside the bed. She would be under the covers.

“With or without clothes?” Cassie asked.

“Depends on how cold the room is and the chances of being interrupted. By small children in our case. Without clothes is nicer.”

More visions to sort through. Blake without clothes. She wasn’t exactly sure what the adult male organ looked like. She would leave that part blank. *He sits on the bed. He slides under the covers. And then what? Blake has done this before. He’ll show me how.*

Trying to get her breath under control, Cassie said, “Thank you. For the time being I have as much information as I need. Wait, I’ve heard some women don’t enjoy the sex act.”

“Some men are inept, lazy, or selfish. A man who truly loves his wife will experiment until he discovers what pleases her.”

Blake will definitely try to give me pleasure. He is under the covers. He touches me. Where? Kisses me. Where? Aroused, Cassie wanted to wiggle her buttocks to scratch an itch that didn’t exactly itch. When she was alone in bed, she would review her visions and try to

imagine the entire scene.

“How does an unbetrothed maiden resist the amorous advances of a generous lover? Her brain knows she shouldn’t, but her body isn’t listening.”

Aunt Pat took Cassie’s hand. “This morning, you assured me you are intact. Up to now, how have you resisted?”

“Why did you ask me that in front of Blake?”

“I’m sorry. The words jumped out of my mouth. But I see how you look at each other. More than your faces, the way your bodies draw closer. Little touches and almost touches. He would never take advantage, but you have a penchant for headlong disaster.”

“Sex is more than foolish.” When she started this conversation, all Cassie wanted to know were the steps that led to a woman becoming pregnant. She should have either pursued that question or retreated. Now she wanted all the feelings and all the images.

“Blake hasn’t tried much.” Last night, he squeezed her thighs. His excuse was he needed to heave her over the gate. “Where were we? I remember. When Blake offers me more, what should I do?”

“I have no idea,” Aunt Pat said. “Syd and I

were young and inexperienced. We did what we wanted. We enjoyed ourselves. Surprised ourselves, too. I was a virgin on my wedding night. He was too.”

Blake is definitely not a virgin.

“Self-control then?” Cassie asked. Her greatest shortcoming was lack of control. *Grit my teeth, run away, cross my legs. Don’t look at him. Change the subject. If Blake seriously tried to seduce me, I would egg him on.* “Unless a woman is forced into an arranged marriage, she should choose a man who gives her sexual pleasure. How will I know if Blake or someone else is a good lover if we don’t have sex before we marry?”

“Whoa.” Her aunt threw up her hands. “Back up. Sexual pleasure is all well and good, but a happy marriage requires much more. And I don’t mean how much money he has or if he’s in line for a title. Seek a man who is responsible with finances and will be a devoted father to your future children. A man who wants to live with you, wherever that may be. He should be pleasant company. He should not embarrass you with his infidelities. You won’t find all those qualities in any one man, but that should be your goal.”

Why am I only considering Blake? How many

of these qualities does he have? Does he even know himself?

“There is more,” Aunt Pat said.

“Really? My brain is full. Can this wait until tomorrow?”

Her aunt took her elbow. “Before you choose a husband, you must ask, will I be a good wife? Can you manage a household, be a good hostess, and more important, a good mother? When the two of you disagree, will you be sympathetic to his view but forceful if you know you’re right?”

Cassie’s mind reeled. Unless she got her wayward ways under control, she would be a terrible wife.

“You’ve attended weddings,” Aunt Pat went on. “I take thee to be my lawful wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, forsaking all others, according to God’s holy law’. That is a promise you both make.”

Cassie finished the vows. “Til death do us part.”

Chapter 21

Lunch and the Museum

Thursday, Blake arrived early at the Willoughbys. He didn't even look for Cassie. Suspicion consumed him. His mother wouldn't stand still long enough to answer his questions. She merely said today's luncheon would "clear the air".

Aunt Pat kissed his cheek. She did the same for Stephen as she ushered them into the dining room.

"The others will be here soon," she said. "Your mother has a seating plan. Stephen, you are on this side of the table at the end. Blake, you are on the other side, second from the end."

A seating plan for a family lunch? That seemed rather elaborate. The mahogany table had four straight-back chairs per side with one more at each end. On the embroidered table runner, cut flowers floated in small bowls. They were pretty, smelled sweet, and too small to block anyone's view. Mother's plan

must be for a group discussion. An announcement? What did his mother have to announce?

The buffet was heaped with trays of tiny sandwiches filled with green things and bits of nuts. More trays held fresh fruit, sliced vegetables, and feminine food he didn't recognize. A cold lunch meant the servants had this part of the day off. French glass doors opened onto the side yard where red, yellow, and white flowers bloomed. He could never remember their names. He surveyed the room as if planning an attack. Or expecting an ambush.

To keep from twitching, Blake laced his fingers behind his back. Stephen talked to Syd. The women worked in the kitchen. He didn't want to talk to anybody. Carrying a platter of sliced meat and cheese, Cassie came in through the open kitchen door. She set the food on a side table.

"Gentlemen," she greeted them. "Aunt Pat told you where to sit?"

Outside, Blake heard a carriage arrive. He rushed down the front steps to welcome Lydia, her husband Phillip Townsend, and Blake's darling niece Elizabeth, who would turn five in a few days. His mother and Cassie's father

emerged last from the carriage. Elizabeth took Blake's hand as they walked up the stairs. He nodded to his brother-in-law who grinned at him. *Why is Phillip grinning?*

In the dining room, Aunt Pat and Syd ushered everyone to their assigned seats. Cassie sat to Blake's left. Mother sat on his right. His mother squeezed his hand, then patted his knee.

After blessing the food, Syd passed around the platters. Even the tea was in a pot so each person had to pour their own. Blake ate heartily. From years as a soldier, he learned to never let unsettling thoughts keep him from eating. He assembled a beef sandwich. Onto his plate, he dished out cole slaw, fruit salad, olives, potato salad, and pickled beets. He ate through one plate and half-filled another.

He listened to the hubbub of conversation but contributed nothing. The others talked of the weather, news of Napoleon building an army, and some new scandal about Cassie's hero Lord Byron. When everyone finished eating, Cassie and Aunt Pat carried the dishes and platters to the kitchen. Returning with more trays, they passed out cheesecake topped with strawberry jam.

As they sampled the dessert, Mother said,

“Lydia has something to tell you. It is why we are gathered here today.”

Blake studied Lydia. His sister pursed her lips, shook her head, looked at her husband, and then at the rest of them.

“We, uh. Well yes,” Lydia said. “Phillip and I have an announcement. We are going to have another baby. We waited until we were sure . . .”

Phillip put his arm around her shoulder. “Lydia is four months along. We will welcome our second child in October.”

Blake remembered how long Lydia and Phillip had tried before Elizabeth arrived. He suspected his sister had a few miscarriages.

Lydia beamed. “Mother saw me in my nightgown and guessed. She won’t let me keep my secret any longer.”

Blake bathed in his sister’s happiness. He loved the unseen baby. He would pat her stomach later. What a relief. This was not what he had been dreading.

“My dear sister, please make this child a boy so I will no longer be required to produce an heir.”

He listened as the others congratulated the couple. They discussed baby names, Grace for a girl, Phillip for a boy. What room in their

house should become the nursery. Soon, knitting needles would be clicking.

While Blake forked cheesecake into his mouth, Lydia issued a loud, "Ahem." When silence prevailed, she said, "My mother also has an announcement. Just as momentous as ours. Mother?"

Blake stared at his mother who looked just as intently at him. "Not today," she said softly. "Lydia's news is enough for now."

"No, Mother," Lydia said. "Are you planning to just send invitations to everyone?"

His mother gripped Blake's hand so hard his knuckles hurt. If she were anyone else, he would have pried her fingers loose. "I'm a big boy," he whispered. "I can handle whatever you have to say."

She took a deep breath. Then she let go of his hand. She put her other hand on James's shoulder. "I wanted to tell each of you our news, one at a time. But Blake has been preoccupied lately. The rest of you have no doubt guessed." Chin lifted, she said, "All right then. James and I are going to be married."

The room fell silent. Blake heard the parlor clock tick off the seconds. Were they all afraid to speak?

Finally, Syd clapped James on the

shoulder. “All those years ago, you introduced me to my wife. And Patience introduced you to Grace. We planned a double wedding. Better late than not at all. Congratulations, old man.”

Cassie’s father grinned. The others made comments. Some asked when and where the nuptials would take place and who would make up the wedding party. Would they honeymoon somewhere?

Blake clenched his fists. How could his mother be so foolish? By his own admission, her charming fiancé had a notorious lack of regard for money. Blake remembered Cassie’s appraisal of her father. James didn’t make things happen, things just happened to him. This must be Mother’s doing. Had she discussed the legal issues with her intended? Owning two estates, inheritance dependent on who died first.

Aunt Pat suggested they adjourn to the back parlor and celebrate with champagne. In ones and twos, the other guests headed down the hall.

Blake confronted Cassie. “Did you know about this?”

She sighed. “He spends so much time with Grace, and I have my own full schedule. I

rarely talk to him. I know you don't approve."

"What do you think of this marriage?" He bit out the words.

"I'm delighted," she said. "They obviously love each other. He will be a good husband, attentive and kind. They should have gotten married forty years ago."

"I will discuss this with my mother."

"She won't change her mind. They have behaved properly. Or if they haven't, no one has caught them out."

He started to pace but thought better of it. Unclenching his fists, he shoved his hands into his too tight trouser pockets. "You know my objections."

"They are well founded," she said. "My father is not always wise about financial matters. He is a kindly landlord, but sometimes tenants and tradesmen take advantage of him. Your mother will help him manage River's Leap."

"What about your sisters?"

As if afraid to miss the congratulations and toasts, Cassie glanced down the hall. "They will welcome her as a second mother. At their ages, Selene is eighteen and Lyra is fifteen, they need a mother's guidance. I haven't set a good example for them."

His mother was abandoning him for another man. Blake would have to share his home with a stranger. What other selfish misgivings could he cobble up?

“One thing is clear,” he said. “When they wed, you and I will be brother and sister. Any thought of our marrying is out of the question.”

Cassie laughed.

~ ~ ~

The next forenoon, Blake escorted Cassie to the British Museum. He had talked to his mother who praised every aspect of her future husband. She and James had belonged together since they'd first met.

“Please, Blake,” she almost cried. “Be happy for me.”

Given the trouble he'd caused her, he offered his blessing. He tried to sound sincere. Today, Cassie hadn't mentioned their parents' nuptials, and he would not broach the subject.

At the Museum, their young guide cared not a fig that Blake was an honest to goodness British lord. The fellow led them up the Grand Staircase and into the Egypt Gallery. There, he enthused over the age of every item, where the piece had been found and by whom. He

concluded with the artifact's contribution to the history of the world.

Cassie said she wanted to see the Rosetta Stone and the mummies, with or without their coffins. They visited those rooms next. Blake wanted to see the new exhibit of ancient Roman weapons recently unearthed near Hadrian's Wall. Down another corridor, they came to the Roman Gallery. A small crowd gathered around the glass encased display. Blake moved Cassie aside to get a better look. Javelins, swords, discus, and sabers, the array astonished him. Some were damaged; wooden parts missing, metal eaten through or broken.

"No touching, I suppose," Blake muttered. "I'd like to handle each of them. Throw the javelin. Take the heft of the saber. Swing the discus."

She cuddled against his arm. "You're a lord. Maybe the curators will give you permission."

"They'd be fools if they did. The Romans conquered most of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa with not much more than these simple weapons."

"No guns," she teased. "No cannon?"

"Guns aren't worth much. The Romans used catapults to launch fire bombs."

Blake listened intently as their guide described each newly discovered item. He asked the young man, in what century might the weapons have been crafted? Exactly where were they found? Were any bodies found among the weapons? If so, what kind of wounds killed the victims? The guide answered as much he knew.

Cassie asked Blake, "Which of those weapons would you use in a battle?"

"You can only use a javelin once. If you miss, the enemy will use the weapon against you. The saber is best. Tempered steel. These look perfectly balanced. They were probably crafted for the size and strength of each soldier."

"Do you miss the war?" she said.

Already, he had revealed too much about his war experiences. Her sympathy made him want to say more. Though he had done far worse things than she imagined, in many ways they were two of a kind.

"No soldier misses the battlefield," he said. "Wars begin when powerful people want more land, slaves or loot. They invent an excuse to attack a weaker country. There is no glory in death and destruction. We soldiers do what we must to stay alive and to protect our

comrades.”

“And to reach the objective,” she added.

He took a deep breath, which didn’t calm him. Cassie understood him better than any other woman had. Because she shared his love for adventure and danger, he was willing to share the horrors of war. But he feared he might reveal too much of his feelings. He carried the guilt, the shame. Why burden her with it.

“Have you seen enough here?” he asked.

“If you have.”

“Let’s walk in the gardens. You like flowers.”

He hurried her down the stairs and out a rear door. Outside, the sun streamed through gauzy clouds. Their silent walk gave him time to gather his thoughts. Cassie meant more to him than he expected. Her past adventures and future possibilities intrigued him. Her generous curves tempted him. In spite of Stephen’s instructions in gentility, she was still as much a rebel as he was.

He walked her through the sculpted gardens. Cassie named the flowers she recognized and read aloud the markers on the ones she didn’t. Between two fountains, he spotted a bench. He led her there and sat her

down.

She stared out over the elaborate garden. “Did you attend Sandhurst because your father wanted you to?”

He brought her to the Museum to view the weapons. He should expect some military questions. “When I turned twelve, my father asked me to be cabin boy on the ship he commanded. I was so excited he wanted to spend time with me. He didn’t treat me any different from the other lads. I worked hard. But the farther we got out to sea, the more queasy my stomach became. I spent a good deal of time throwing up whatever I ate. Finally, I had to stay in my hammock. After a trip to Gibraltar and back, he sent me home to Mother.”

“You were disappointed?”

“When we landed in England, I wanted to kiss the ground. I’ve never gotten my sea legs. I can sail close to shore, but anything beyond ten miles or so, I’m worthless.”

“Then why Sandhurst?”

“A family tradition,” he said. “That was the first school where I paid attention in class. Weapons, strategies, battle formations fascinate me. Napoleon became Emperor of France. He wanted control of Europe. I wanted

to test myself. See if I could be a good soldier.”

“You are good.”

He shouldn't have started this. But if he wanted more than friendship with Cassie, he must answer her questions.

“I am good at surveying the battleground in advance. I am cool under fire, and I can make quick decisions.” *And I can close off the visions of men and horses wounded and dying.* He had killed men who were so badly wounded they couldn't be saved, carried others to the doctors who cut off their limbs or sewed up eyes that would never see again. He'd shooed away birds and scavengers attracted by the blood.

At the end of every battle, he reported to his commanding officer. Then he ordered his men not to assault or pillage among the friendly local population. He did whatever was expected without resorting to tremors, tears, or drink. He was an outstanding commander, one of Wellington's favorites. He should tell her what he was good at. But Cassie hadn't asked for more.

In response to his silence, she squeezed his arm. “Your success made other officers jealous. Because you were never injured, they

accused you of cowardice.”

She asked the crucial question, the one he refused to examine himself. He had to tell her some of the truth.

“I never suffered more than bruises and minor cuts. My men turned down promotions to stay in my unit. We had the fewest casualties. The jokes, the snide remarks, the taunts from other troops and their officers, I could put up with. I suppose they were jealous. When I refused to react to their jibes, they accused my men of cowardice. That we shrank from real fights. Why didn’t we have more deaths, more serious injuries? None of this calumny came from my superiors. Only a few majors and captains and their troops insulted us. But they were a few too many.”

Pictures played in his head. Fistfights, free-for-alls, near riots. Defending their honor and their commander, his men received more injuries than they had in battles. Wellington and the other Generals tried to stop the gossip, but they were busy winning a war.

He would tell Cassie a truth he never admitted to his mother or Stephen or anyone else. “Without meaning to, I put myself in harm’s way. I’d race up to the front line, which is poor battle strategy, and fight on foot

with bayonet or sword. I never put my men or our objective in danger. Just myself.”

“But you couldn’t force yourself to act foolishly,” Cassie said.

“Always at the last minute, I pulled back from some reckless action.” He cringed at some of the stupid things he came near to doing. “I didn’t die. I got a few extra scratches. Bullets through my uniform took off a bit of skin, but I still couldn’t get a serious wound.”

“You were lucky.”

Guilt washed over him. “No one is that lucky.”

“Do you believe you were a coward?” she said.

Until Cassie, no one ever asked him that question. “I had the advantage of being on horseback.”

“Valor,” she said. “Your troops respected you.”

He closed his eyes. His self-inflicted pain ran deep. “They called me The Ghost. Some believed bullets passed clean through me as if I were a specter. They believed I had the power to protect them.”

“Did your charm protect them?”

He took a ragged breath before he spoke. “Bullets and swords did pass through my men.

Some died. Some were too wounded to fight on.” Casualties, they were called, a vague word for pain, permanent injury or death. He had avoided becoming a casualty.

On Blake’s last foolhardy gesture, his Master Sergeant Thomas Simmons took a bullet to his knee, ripping out bone and cartilage. The doctor took off the man’s leg just below the thigh. Never again did Blake try to prove his own bravery.

Cassie pulled his arms around her waist. He had to move closer to hold her. She rested her face against his neck. Tears pricked his eyes. He blinked his wet lashes. *This woman is perfect for me. Do I dare think I can be the man she needs?*

Their arms circling each other, she looked up at him. “The Duke himself sent you home.”

His chest quivered. Men don’t cry. Besides, he knew bawling wouldn’t make him feel any better.

“April, 1814. We won the Peninsula Campaign. We liberated Spain and were about to chase Napoleon back to Paris. Other soldiers took leave to come home. The Duke said he understood my reactions to the insults, but I needed a rest. I argued I could handle the taunts and jeers. He said I had seen too much

of war. And he sent me home.”

Cassie looked into his eyes. She must see his unshed tears. “Exhaustion sent you home.”

“Cassie, I must tell you something. Before I met you, I intended to make a complete ass of myself and scare you off so you would flee back to River’s Leap.”

“You didn’t even know me,” she protested.

“I was unfit company for any woman. And for most men. Then I discovered my mother had told you all of my shortcomings and you intended to hold me up for ransom.”

“All her stories were true,” she added.

“You wanted to run off with an outlaw, namely me. Suddenly, my negative thoughts dimmed. I wanted to be with you. I stopped being morose and hard to live with. Well, not completely, but my behavior is greatly improved. I thought about you instead of feeling sorry for myself.” Or feeling guilty, he added silently.

What else did he want to tell her? *Thank you for rescuing me.*

“What happens now?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But I’m a better man for knowing you.”

That didn’t sound romantic. He wasn’t talking about love. And certainly not

marriage. That was a long way off, if it happened all. He was merely expressing his gratitude.

Chapter 22

Elizabeth's Birthday

Saturday afternoon, Cassie joined Aunt Patience and Uncle Sydney as they drove to Elizabeth's birthday party. Today, Blake's niece would celebrate five years of life. *Oh, to be that young again and not make the mistakes I've made since.*

What a sight greeted them. The Townsends's backyard looked like a circus had set up camp. Above the lawn, purple and pink streamers crisscrossed. Paper balls in the same colors hung from lower tree branches. Servants rushed about, setting up tables and chairs inside and out of a huge white tent. Part of the verandah had been converted into a stage.

She hugged Grace and her father. Then she went looking for the Birthday Girl. She found Elizabeth deep in conversation with Blake. With the most serious expression she'd ever seen, he leaned down to hang on the child's every word. Cassie didn't know if she should

interrupt, but he crooked his finger toward her.

“Elizabeth,” he said, “you remember my friend Cassiopeia Valient. Her friends call her Cassie.”

The child shot Cassie a menacing look. She had only seen such a venomous stare on grown women who thought she might poach their boyfriends.

“That’s all right,” Cassie said. “I’ll mingle with the others.”

Blake stretched out his hand. “Sit beside me.”

With brutal force, Elizabeth said, “No. You will sit beside me. I sit next to my Uncle Blake.”

Cassie did as commanded. If her father married Blake’s mother, Cassie would be Elizabeth’s aunt. No matter how small and impertinent, this future relative should be cultivated.

She dragged a wrought iron chair next to the child. “Elizabeth, your mother is having a baby. You’ll have a little brother or sister. How wonderful.”

The child deigned to look at her rival. “We don’t need a baby. They are turning my play room into a nursery. My mother will be busy

all the time with . . . With . . .” The child’s face turned sour, as if she had bitten into an unripe persimmon.

Cassie finished the sentence. “Busy with the newborn baby. I know how you feel. When I was near your age, my mother had a baby. My sister Selene.” She gulped in an exaggerated breath and humphed. “Babies cry, you know. And poop in their underdrawers.”

Elizabeth’s mouth fell open. “They do? All the time?”

“Not the crying, but the pooping quite often. They have to be fed several times a day. They can’t walk or talk or take care of themselves.”

“Oh dear,” the child said. “This is worse than I thought. Can Mommy send the baby back?”

Cassie arranged her face to look grim. “There are no returns on babies. In a few months or maybe a year, your little sister or brother will learn to walk and talk. You will be the big sister. The baby, who by then is a child, will adore you. He or she will follow you around, want to play and run and laugh. You will teach the little one all you know about being a child. You will protect her and keep her out of trouble. If he’s a brother, he’ll

need a lot more protecting. Since you are the oldest, you will always be the most important child in the family.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure?”

“The oldest child always guides the younger children. The parents have loved the oldest child longer than the later ones. The oldest one is the reason the parents want another baby. They want more children just like you.”

Elizabeth leaned back in her chair. She squeezed Blake’s hand. “When you were a little boy, did you like my mommy? She’s your older sister.”

He swallowed a smile. “Your mother took care of me and played with me and kept me out of trouble. I upset her and pestered her. Sometimes I still do. But she is the best big sister in the whole world. And you will be, too.”

Elizabeth looked at Cassie. “You should marry my Uncle Blake. He needs a wife. You could have children. Have a girl first.”

Blake closed his eyes for a long moment. Then he looked away.

“Thank you for the advice,” Cassie said. “I will find out if he is interested in marrying me.”

Lydia called Elizabeth to greet the arriving guests. The girl leaped off her chair and ran to her mother.

Cassie moved into the seat beside Blake.

He took her arm in his. "What a crowd. Chattering mothers and dressed up little girls."

"How many do they expect?" she asked.

"Ten of Lydia's lady friends and their daughters along with Townsend and Forester aunts, uncles, and cousins. And Stephen because he's like family."

"Quite an elaborate party for a child of five."

"My gift to her," he said. "Isn't she something?"

"Elizabeth adores you to the point of wanting to kill all rivals."

"She's endorsed you."

"Therefore, my duty is to ask your opinion on begetting children."

"I thought the woman did the begetting."

"The inception requires two. And two are required to raise a child."

Why prolong this conversation? After getting to know Ben, Cassie wanted to be a mother. She would warn her children to avoid dangerous adventures. But she would let them get away with as much fun and mischief as

they wanted.

Blake said, "I'd tolerate offspring if they were like Elizabeth."

"She is one of a kind," Cassie said. "Quite mature and opinionated."

"She speaks her mind."

"A Forester trait?"

He avoided looking at her. "If you and I had children, they would be monsters."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he had a point. "They would be like us. Headstrong. Adventurous."

"Out-of-control hellions."

"We could teach them to behave," Cassie argued. "We would know what they were plotting because, at their age, we had the same inclinations."

"Best not to bring the little devils into the world. Save us the heartache, and save them from eventual ruin."

If he didn't want children, he had no reason to marry. Did she want to marry him? She wanted to be with him. The Season was winding down. Soon, members of the *ton* would decamp to their country estates or to the seashore. She would see him at their parents wedding or run into him once in a while at River's Leap or Green Garden. She

would miss him. Every bit of him. She pondered the things which might have been but would not be.

When most of the guests had arrived, Cassie made Blake join the party. Lydia introduced everyone to everyone else. They all buried her in congratulations and advice about her “delicate condition”.

Cassie helped with the games, the songs, and the dances. Elizabeth made herself the center of attention. Next came opening presents, eating luncheon, cutting cake, and spooning out ice cream.

Late afternoon, a magician set up his equipment on the makeshift stage. Cassie was enchanted by the decorations, the happy children running about, and the gay conversation of the adults. Barely speaking to anyone, Blake stayed near her. The magic show began with the birthday girl serving as Sir Mystery’s assistant.

Blake watched intently. “I can see how he’s doing that trick.”

Cassie yawned. “Don’t tell me. I want to believe it’s magic.”

He looked at her. “Time for your afternoon nap?”

“Too much cake. Let’s walk off our

torpor.”

She took his arm, hugging him so that a bit of her bosom touched his upper arm. She wanted a kiss. Perhaps a good-bye kiss, but more than a brush across her lips. If he didn't want to marry her, then Cassie wanted as much affection as he would offer.

“You like flowers,” he said. “Come see the hothouse.”

They walked to the rear of the property. The Townsends's lot covered twice as much land as the Willoughbys's did. Passing through a narrow opening in the hedge, they came to a large greenhouse. Reflecting the blinding white of the sun, the glass faced south.

Blake reached above a ledge and took down a skeleton key. He unlocked the door and ushered her inside. The large room steamed with humidity. Fog covered the giant expanse of windows. Oh my, the flowers were magnificent. She walked beside tables filled with orchids, lilies, irises along with exotic plants she didn't recognize. From the rafters, flowering vines trailed from hanging pots.

“My goodness,” she said. “Many of these plants are tropical. Not just the orchids.”

“Phillip is a horticulturist. He imports, raises, and sells these plants.”

“He makes his living this way?”

“He has a family income. He’s a third son.”

“What a talented man.” *What a lovely occupation, caring for flowers year round.*

Blake followed her up and down the rows. She wanted to touch the leaves and feel the velvet and silky petals, but she dared not. A mix of aromas, sweet to pungent, delicate to strong, filled the air. As she moved past each group of flowers, the scents changed. At the far wall, she turned to survey the scene. Tall potted shrubs with huge leaves grew along the walls.

Blake stood behind her. Without touching her, she felt his nearness. “You’re crowding me.”

“I often do. You never move out of my way. You always stand your ground.”

She turned to him. His eyes, in fact his entire face, brimmed with passion. This time she wanted more than kisses and caresses. She stroked her fingers across his linen shirt. His stomach muscles bunched.

“Regardless of how close I get,” he said, “you never say ‘no’.”

“You haven’t done anything I don’t like.” If he did, would she say ‘no’?

He breathed in her ear. “The air is like a

jungle in here.”

“We could shed some clothing.” What was she thinking? She wasn’t thinking. She was just reacting.

“There must be thirty-five people out there,” he said, “maybe more. Someone may come to see the flowers.”

She moved so close her breasts rested on his shirt. “You know a place where no one will find us, don’t you?”

His arm around her waist, he headed for a doorway hidden behind the shrubs. With the same skeleton key, he unlocked the latch. Cool, fresh air wafted from inside. She stepped down a few stairs into a small cellar. Like a cave, the stone floor and walls were damp.

Blake said, “This is the potting shop.”

“I see,” she said, though she could barely see. Sunlight streamed from a slanted skylight.

Blake led her behind a table. She wondered if he had seduced other women here. She wasn’t being seduced. She was inviting him to do whatever happened next.

“Say ‘no’,” he said.

“Not yet.”

He stripped off his linen jacket and lay it on the table. He undid his collar button, and the next button, and the one after. With the

flick of each button, her breath came faster. In the dim light, she watched his chest rise and fall. Blake pulled her against him. He bent his knees, bringing her down with him. On the floor below the table, she touched something made of rubber. Flat and flexible, the surface was fairly comfortable.

Blake lay her on her back. He paused. Waiting for her to say “no”? Doing her own waiting, she said nothing. The space under the table had room for two. The rubber mat covered most of the floor. He stretched out beside her. Spreading his shirt open, she slid her hand over his bare chest.

His hand covered hers. “My turn first.” He caressed the bodice of her day dress. “Buttons down the front. Did you plan ahead?”

“I did not.”

With one hand, he freed each dress button from its hole. He moved lower and lower until the fabric fell from her shoulders. She shrugged out of as much of the dress as she could. He wasn’t going to kiss her mouth? What were the words she searched for? Yes. *Oh, yes. Keep going.*

He tugged the straps of her chemise off her shoulders. She helped by pulling them down to reveal her breasts. Still studying her face,

he rubbed his thumb over one exposed nipple.

More than once, she gasped, "Oh."

Far from her bosom, sensations broke out inside her. Her brain filled with wanton desire, but she kept her body almost still. He lowered his head to her breast. Sliding his fingers down her side, he filled his mouth with her trembling skin. As his teeth caressed her areola, she combed her fingers through his hair. Her body moved rhythmically with his motions.

He lifted his head. "Delicious. I assume they both taste the same."

She laughed. "How would I know?" He was offering her what she desired. Memories.

Cassie lifted her legs and then her buttocks as he slid her dress and chemise up and over her head. With most of her skin exposed, she realized her legs were clamped shut. She opened them a little. Her eyes now adjusted to the sun spattered darkness, she welcomed his grin.

His hand smoothed up the inside of her thigh. "I've been here before."

"Yes, you have." Through her mind flashed the memory of his hands squeezing her thighs as he lifted her over the gate.

"I intend to explore further," he said. He

moved his hand closer to her woman part. "Drawers." He sounded disappointed.

"Though fashion frowns, I always wear them." Her words came slowly, like rain dripping off the roof.

He tugged at one side and then the other until the ties loosened. Again with only one hand, he must have practiced these moves on other women, he pulled the muslin garment free.

Close to her woman part, he continued to stroke her inner thighs. "Women enjoy a man touching this area, or so I've heard from other ladies. Let me know if you agree."

Cassie nodded. No words were possible.

His finger slid inside her. He stilled. When she didn't say "no", he added more fingers, gently pulsing in and out. Cassie's head fell back. She seemed to float above her body. With his thumb, he caressed the outside of her secret place. Her body jolted. Still thrusting inside her, he moved his thumb in circles. Her mind turned numb. Her body became pure sensations. With each thrust, she pushed against him. *He gives me this gift. He gains no release. Blake is a generous lover.*

No sounds came from him. Only soft gasps flowed from her. Cascades of joy, spasms of

exquisite pleasure engulfed her until something inside her broke loose. While her body trembled, her back arched, her stomach tightened. Blake stopped moving. She didn't. She pushed his hand away so she could bend her knees and curl her body in on herself. She swayed with the feelings inside her. She didn't want them to end. At the same time, she feared they never would. Soothing her, he pulled her body against his.

She rested in his arms. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," he said.

After her body stilled and her mind again worked, she sat up. Blake lay on his back beside her.

She retied her drawers and drew her chemise down to cover her breasts. "My turn."

"No." He started to get up.

She shoved him back. "I want to explore."

"Nothing below my waist."

"We'll see."

He didn't resist when she grabbed his shirttail and plucked it free of his trousers. He quivered as she rubbed both hands over his smooth, taut stomach. She tiptoed two fingers up to one of his nipples. He grabbed her hand.

She said, "My fingers are above your waist."

“Be careful.”

“Yes, sire.”

Gently, she rubbed the tip until it turned hard. As he had done with hers, she lowered her head and licked his nipple. Gasps poured from his mouth. She raised up and climbed on to him just below his stomach. His male organ poked her from behind. She smoothed her hands over his chest.

She lowered her mouth to his. “You must kiss me.”

“Let me catch my breath.”

“No time,” she said.

She forced her tongue between his lips. With both arms, he crushed her hard against him. His hand cupped her behind. He kissed her more thoroughly than he ever had before.

“We have to stop,” he said.

“I haven’t said ‘no’ yet.”

“I’m saying ‘no’. A few more minutes, and I will embarrass myself.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant. She had heard the phrase “spilling his seed”. “I’ll just lay here on top of you for a while. Is that all right?”

“Not too long. People will wonder where we are. Someone may come looking for us. Like your father.”

With those words, Cassie hopped to her feet and searched for her dress. Blake took longer to get to his feet. He fumbled with his shirt until she had to help him align the holes with the buttons. When he turned his back to tuck in his shirt, she smoothed her fingers through his hair. She rebraided his strands and tied the end with a ribbon.

She fiddled with her own hair, knowing she did not look the same as before she entered the potting shop.

Blake returned the small room to its original order. He opened an outside door and led her into the bright sunlight.

~ ~ ~

An hour later, Blake stood beside Elizabeth. She would not let go of his hand. She dragged him around as she bid good-bye, thanking each person for coming and for the presents she received. His niece gave Cassie a hug and a kiss. Had the two of them planned to seduce him? Not exactly the right word, but Elizabeth understood more than a child of five should.

Blake couldn't bear to look at Cassie. After this afternoon, she would visit his dreams more often. Ever since he met her, he looked

forward to going to sleep.

Finally, most of the guests had left. Cassie departed with her father and the Willoughbys. The collapsed tent lay on the ground. Servants picked up paper, ribbons, and other debris from the yard. His family and a few stragglers were in the house. That left Stephen and himself.

“I’m taking a walk,” his friend said.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” Blake replied.

“You’re coming with me.”

And so he did. Blake expected Stephen to either ask questions or make accusations. He had no idea how long he and Cassie stayed in the hothouse and potting shop. Depending on which scene flickered in his brain, they could have been gone hours or minutes.

Stephen strode ahead. “I am escorting Cassie to one last ball, and then I am done. I will return to my home in Grimsby. She then becomes your responsibility.”

“Please stay. I promise I will never again mention your debt to me for saving your life.”

Stephen let him catch up. “I did as you asked. I squired her about for the Season. I taught her the rules of polite society. So you could court and win her.”

“I haven’t won her.”

“Blake, you are such an ass. Cassie is an extraordinary woman. She’s never fallen for a man before. Not even for me. Often you behave in ways that send other women fleeing in tears. Yet Cassie persists.”

“I behave much better since I met her. She’s inspired me to give up my desperate ways.”

“You may not admit it, but Cassie has saved your life.”

“I admit it.”

Stephen stopped and faced him. “What are your intentions toward her?”

“I don’t have any.”

“You said you wanted to marry her.”

Looking for a way to escape, Blake glanced around. He truly was a coward. “I wanted to see if we suit. We don’t.”

“Beg pardon?”

Blake walked ahead, this time making his friend catch up. “When I met her, she became a welcome distraction from my miserable life. When I had to compete with you for her approval, I loved the challenge of getting her to like me. Now . . .”

“Now,” Stephen said, “you care for her. You are a better person for knowing her.”

The truth he'd been avoiding overtook him. "Cassie deserves a better husband than myself. I may fall back into my errant ways. Even if she holds me steady, I don't amount to much except on the battlefield."

Stephen put his hand on Blake's shoulder. "You may never recover from your war experiences. I have seen dead soldiers, but I didn't see them die. I've seen wounded men, but I didn't see the attacks they endured."

And you never killed a man and watched him die. Felt the blood lust. Wanted to kill the man's comrades.

Blake tried to shrug out of his grasp, but Stephen wouldn't let go. "Cassie wants you. I don't know why because I am a better catch."

"Much better," Blake insisted.

"I am out of the running. Frankly, you understand her. There must be reasons why no one has offered for her thus far. Or if some man did, she turned him down. You may be her last chance at matrimony."

His friend's words hardly seemed fair. "I have no example in my life of how a husband and father should act."

"Do the opposite of what your father did."

"You overlook a great deal."

Who am I? I used to be a man so full of

misery and guilt, I barely wanted to stay alive. Now I want to live for Cassie. But I can't be the man she needs. She said we were like fire and fire. We would burn each other up. Under Stephen's influence, her fire has banked. She controls her temper though not her love for adventure. I dare her to be wild. I am still the firebrand, the rebel, the outlaw.

When Blake remained silent, Stephen said, "I intend to be best man at your wedding."

Chapter 23

Cassie Truly Chooses

By Tuesday morning, Cassie hadn't seen or heard from Blake. She finished breakfast with her father before he went off to visit his fiancée. Monday evening, Stephen escorted her to Lord Marbury's Bachelors Ball. Her suitor was sweet but oddly distant. Something troubled him, but her careful questions gained no answers. Did he suspect what she and Blake had done at Elizabeth's party? She dared not bring up that subject.

Over and over, she reviewed what she allowed Blake to do, what she invited him to do, in the Townsends's potting shop. Had she been too forward? For the younger set, the purpose of a Season was to find a mate. She had two candidates, and neither gave any sign of offering for her.

Cassie trod a second lap around the Willoughby's garden path. Picturing Blake and his nervous pacing, she imitated his pattern. Out by the street, someone arrived by

horseback. She hurried to the side of the house. With hair flying and collar loose, Blake climbed down from the saddle and tied his horse to the lamp post.

She dashed out to greet him. He didn't look at her, just grabbed her hand and led her back the way she'd come.

"Who's home?" His abrupt words were not exactly friendly.

"Myself and the cook. Who are you looking for?"

"You. I have some things to tell you."

He sat her on the top step leading to Uncle Syd's home office. His arms crossed, Blake stood two steps below. As if checking to see if anyone could hear them, he glanced around the yard and up the sidewalk.

He said, "I'm leaving town."

She looked up at him. All she could see was the underside of his chin. "Oh? When will you return?"

"Not for a while. Could be a long time."

She couldn't bear to think, *He's leaving me, and this is my fault*. "Well, um. Will I see you again?"

"Once in a while. Family gatherings."

Blake was breaking off with her. Because of what they did in the potting shop? Because

she pressed him at the museum to talk about his war experiences? Or something else? Her throat hurt from thinking. Unshed tears, stomach roiling, afraid to speak, she folded her hands in her lap.

He sat down beside her, close but not touching. His face showed anger or maybe regret. Certainly sorrow. "I'm going to tell you all that led up to this. You deserve to know. In March when you visited Green Garden, we were supposed to see if we suited each other. Marriage and all the rest."

Unable to find words, she kept looking at him.

"I like you," he said. "I feel better with you near me. Since we met, I've stopped looking for trouble just to make myself feel better. You are . . ."

"A tonic," she prompted.

He pursed his lips. "I haven't felt terrible since I met you."

"I've enjoyed your company too." Her words were so quiet she barely heard them.

"At first, you didn't like me," he said. "I asked my mother how I could make you love me."

Cassie almost blurted out, *Exactly when in my visit did this conversation take place?* But she

didn't think he'd tolerate the interruption.

"Mother said you wanted to choose a husband, not be forced by circumstances to marry. To encourage you to choose me, Mother said I must do three things. First, I had to arrange for your father to receive money to repair River's Leap. I sent Stephen to visit James's debtors and buy up their loans. Stephen forged your father's name on the contracts. After James marries my mother, she can convince him to sign the papers. Stephen got the men to cough up what coin they could. I provided the rest, offering the men a twenty percent discount if they never told anyone. I am more ruthless than your father. Those men will repay me."

Now she understood. Blake's revelation explained the coincidence that her father's debtors repaid him exactly the amount of money he needed. Grace had helped her old friend, and Blake freed Cassie from having to be nice to him.

Before she could comment, Blake continued. "Her second requirement was I had to court you. I tried. You know I have no talent for courting or doing anything that pleases a woman."

You nearly seduced me, or I almost seduced

you. Not an approved part of courting, but my favorite of all the times we spent together.

“I like the way you courted me,” she said. “You are unconventional but exciting. And a great deal of fun.”

“The third requirement you already know,” Blake said. “Find someone, namely Sir Stephen, to bring you out in Society and let other men have a go at you. On that point, I didn’t follow Mother’s advice. I told Stephen to keep every proper candidate away from you. Instead, he fell for you himself.”

When she remained silent, Blake said, “Mother said even if I did all these things, you might not want me. Only that I must give you the freedom to choose.”

Grace gave her the right to choose. Blake made her choice possible. After all the subterfuge, the courting and the adventures, Cassie knew her choice. She wanted Blake.

He said, “Aren’t you angry about some of this?”

Too much information exploded in her brain to sort through it all. Blake had manipulated her. But by carrying out his mother’s instructions, he saved River’s Leap, introduced her to Stephen, and joined her in one adventure after another.

Cassie said, "My aunt and uncle sponsored me for the Season. They paid for my dresses and gowns. Was that also your mother's idea?"

"Of course."

"You paid for my wardrobe?"

He shrugged.

My, I am expensive. She dreaded what he would say next. "Now what?"

He stood up. Was he about to escape? "You were right in the first place. We don't suit. You may be good for me, but I am not the right man for you. I frequently embarrass you. I insulted your father. What I did with you at Elizabeth's party."

"What we did in the potting shop was my idea."

"You shouldn't have ideas like that."

She closed her eyes. For whatever reason, and she didn't think he had told her his real one, Blake was giving up on her. He got to know her and didn't find what he needed.

She added, "And our out-of-control children."

"Those too. You see what I mean."

He didn't want her. He wasn't required to supply all his reasons.

"I see."

She would save her tears for later. Quiet

tears. Screaming inside her head but not out loud. In her room, door closed, windows barred, she'd let her misery flow until she either washed herself free or drowned in wanting him.

He must have noticed her sorrow because he touched her shoulder. "Cassie, I've told you more about myself than I have anyone else. I have scars on my soul I can never speak of. There is darkness inside me."

Afraid to look at him, she said, "From the war."

He sighed. "You brought me some daylight."

Her voice quavered. "I want to be your sunshine." She didn't care if she cried in front of him, though her tears would probably scare him away.

"Marriage has to be more than that," he said. "I'm not fit for any woman."

She got to her feet. "I don't believe that."

"I do," he said. "You should marry Stephen. He calms you down, makes you think before you act. He's taught you to be more feminine. All the things you wanted. You'd have nicer children with him."

Her temper flared. *Don't you dare tell me who to marry. Though he is right about Stephen's*

qualities.

What else could she say? Not the words inside her head. *I love you. I want to marry you. In spite of the possible results, I want us to have children.*

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

“I’m headed out right now.”

She glanced at the street. His horse’s saddlebags were full.

Her words came out in a whisper. “Kiss me good-bye.”

“That’s too dangerous.”

Instead, he squeezed her hand. She wanted his arms around her. She put her free hand on top of his. A hand sandwich. Cassie couldn’t look at him. He meant so much to her. Stephen had changed her, but Blake had done more. He made her believe she could control her behavior and still live an exciting life. That life could be fully lived with Blake. But he didn’t want her.

He slid his hand free, mounted his horse, and rode up the street. And never looked back.

Cassie listened to the birds. She looked at the flowers. The blue irises had opened. A breeze rustled the leafy trees. She looked at her hands, her shoes, her morning dress Blake had paid for. Then she went in through the

kitchen door and upstairs to her room.

She didn't close the door and cry as she'd planned. If she had, she'd feel worse than she already did. Instead, she took her dresses out of the closet and trunk. She scattered them on the bed, the chairs, and the floor.

She chose the practical ones she could use at River's Leap; day dresses, riding habits, simple gowns for country dances. The rest she put back in the closet. She found her valises. By noon, she had packed all that would fit. She'd have to find more baggage for the rest.

When Aunt Pat came home, Cassie told her she was leaving for River's Leap as soon as possible. They talked about Blake paying for her dresses. Cassie thanked her aunt for inviting her to stay and for sacrificing her time to chaperone her. Patience started to ask why, but Cassie stopped her. If she had to repeat Blake's heartbreaking words, she would cry those miserable tears she'd been fighting.

"I love you," Cassie said.

"Darling, I love you, too. Whatever happened, we can fix it."

Cassie shook her head. "This Season has been wonderful. I've learned a great deal. About London, about how to behave, about myself. Thank you so much."

Aunt Pat found more valises and a trunk so Cassie could finish packing. Now she must figure out how to get her belongings and herself back home.

Just before supper, her father arrived.

"I'm going home to River's Leap," she told him. "The Season's almost over. I've seen and done all there is to do."

He put his arms around her shoulders and hugged her. "Blake came to say good-bye this morning?"

"Yes. He said he might see me sometime in the future. Family gatherings and the like." *And I should marry Stephen because Blake doesn't want me.*

He looked at her. "Grace and I will not marry until he returns. She is more upset than you are."

Grace is upset because Blake doesn't want to marry me? "He's just returning to Green Garden."

"No he's not. He sent someone to bring his uniforms and weapons."

Her heart caught in her throat. "Exactly where is Blake going?"

"He must have told you."

"He just said he was leaving town. You tell me."

“He’s on his way to Belgium.”

Belgium. For months, the British Army had sent troops across the Channel believing Napoleon and his army would soon invade some part of Europe.

She said, “Blake’s not in the Army anymore.”

Her sat her down on the loveseat. “He received a letter from the Duke of Wellington. The whole missive was in the Duke’s hand. He has recommissioned Blake as a Colonel. Wellington needs his help to defeat Napoleon.”

Blake thinks he may die. Perhaps he’s worried he might again try to prove his courage. War is his darkness. He is returning to the scene of his nightmares.

So wrapped up in my hurt feelings, I forgot to say “I choose you, Blake. I’ll wait for you, pray for you, meet you at the dock when you return. All in one piece, wounded, broken, I will be with you. You belong to me. We belong together. I will love you forever.”

She hoped she could remember all those words.

Cassie leaped to her feet. “I have to tell him I love him. We’ll ride over to Lydia’s house right now.”

“Blake left this morning,” her father said. “Stephen is there. He’s leaving tomorrow. You can send a message with him.”

“Where is Stephen going?”

“He’s been called back into army service. He received a similar letter from the Duke.”

“Stephen’s not a soldier. He’s a solicitor.”

To make her sit down, her father tugged on her hand. “He’s also a military supply master. A very good one, I’m told. He usually supplies Blake’s troops.”

He’s not in battles, she hoped. “What does a supply master do?”

“He procures the needs of the troops; food, clothing, tents, medical supplies, other things. Not weapons I don’t think. The supplies are protected at the rear of the army. If the soldiers retreat from the battle, their enemy tries to capture the supply wagons.”

Probably because she wanted to, she had missed the clues. Blake and Stephen were friends because they met at Sandhurst. They’d been together for much of the war. That’s why they worked so well together when they captured Miles. Twice, Blake saved Stephen’s life during battles.

“Take me to see Stephen right now,” she said. “I have to give him Valor.”

~ ~ ~

Twenty minutes later, Cassie and her father arrived at the Townsend household. They waited in the large front parlor until a maid brought Stephen in.

“Father,” Cassie said. “While I talk to Stephen, you go find Grace.”

He nodded as he left the room.

She rose to greet her erstwhile beau. “I brought Valor. Blake forgot to take him when he called on me this morning.”

“Thank you,” Stephen said. “I planned to stop by before I leave in the morning.”

“To say good-bye or just to pick up his horse?”

“Both. I had business to attend to today. This morning, Blake completed his errands and headed for Dover.”

Cassie had been an “errand”. “He failed to mention he was going to Belgium.”

Stephen’s mouth frowned but his eyes smiled. “For all his bravery, the man can be a coward. Especially with women.”

She took his hand. “He said I should marry you. That you would be the best husband for me.” Stephen’s cheeks reddened. She didn’t mean to embarrass him. Wait, she did mean to. “You are kind. Always a gentleman.

Generous. Full of good cheer. And very attractive.”

He allowed his smile to capture his face. “You did not come to compliment me. You came because . . .” She waited for him to find the right words.

Instead, he said, “You are right. I am an excellent candidate to be any woman’s husband. Including yours. Except for one drawback, I would pursue you, offer for you, and marry you.” He glanced around the room as if his next words were difficult. “The problem is I want . . . No, I deserve a woman who loves me as passionately as you love Blake.”

Those tears found Cassie again. A few rolled down her cheeks. Stephen put his arms around her. She dampened his collar.

Finally, she raised her head. “Yes, you do. I am here because Blake said we had no future together. He told me to find someone not so full of darkness.”

I finally understand. He broke off because he doesn’t want to inflict his misery on me.

“His leaving upset me so much I couldn’t think of what to say. I didn’t tell him I love him. That I want to marry him. When you leave tomorrow, take me along. If we leave

early, we can catch up with him. I've heard there aren't enough ships to get all the soldiers from Dover to Antwerp."

"Cassie," Stephen said, "write him a letter. I'll carry your missive to him."

She stamped her foot. "I can't put my feelings in a letter. I have to see his face. He has to see mine. I have to hug him and kiss him. Not to mention, my penmanship is terrible. Like hen scratchings."

"You and I cannot travel together unchaperoned," Stephen said. "When we find him, you can't go with us to Belgium. You'll be left by yourself in Dover."

She hadn't thought this through. "I can dress like a boy."

He pulled her loose. "Absolutely not. Dictate a letter. Take your time. Print all the characters."

"What if my father comes with us? He can chaperone."

From across the room, she heard her father say, "I can indeed."

Stephen looked at Cassie and then at her father and then back at her. "Regardless of my arguments, you will chase Blake down, will you not?"

"You know me well."

From the far side of the room, she heard Grace's voice. "I too did not tell my son all I wanted to. I will send my letter with Stephen. And I have excellent penmanship."

Chapter 24

Parry and Thrust

Late afternoon, Blake slid his sword into its sheath. Proud of himself, he'd beaten six of the Army's best fencers, including some men a decade younger than himself. But age tells, and he'd had enough fencing for one afternoon.

Built to look like a Medieval castle, Fort Clarence's walls flew pennants from every pole. On the Fort's esplanade, a crowd of soldiers milled about. Yesterday afternoon, he'd joined these troops. They were waiting for more ships to arrive fifty miles east at Dover.

He plopped down on a short bench. Blake thought wearing himself out with exercise would drive her from his mind. Instead, with every lunge, every thrust of his sword, he saw Cassie. Feet spread, she frowned or smiled or blew kisses to him. He ran both hands through his new military style haircut. He missed her so much his stomach ached. Taking off his

mask, he swept a towel across his damp forehead. That's where Cassie stayed, right inside his forehead. She wouldn't leave him alone. He longed to see her head toss, see her ride astride, just look at her. What magnificent legs she had.

A young man came through the Main Gate. His face masked, the lad strode toward him. Blake shook his head to clear it. Was he losing his mind? The way the boy moved his hips, his legs, even how he swung his arms reminded him of Cassie.

Stephen will take care of her. Maybe they will marry. Thinking of her with another man, even the man he admired most, tore at his insides. *I had her. Almost. I pleased her. I abandoned her. Why? Because I can't be the man she needs. But she is everything I want.*

The young man stopped close enough to offer a salute. Blake couldn't refuse the invitation. He got to his feet, adjusted his sword, and returned the salute. He preferred to fight without a mask. He could see and breathe better. While he yelled insults, he could twist his face into terrifying scowls.

Bending his knees, he howled, "*En garde!*"

As the lad stepped back, Blake took the offensive. Swords clashing, they fought back

and forth. The sandy soil made their footing difficult. He had an advantage because he had fought on similar ground. He tried a few lunges. The boy was quick to avoid them. First blood would end the match. The generals had warned them not to inflict serious injuries.

Too tired to continue much longer, Blake lunged at the boy's arm. He stabbed through the youth's jacket, inflicting nothing more than a scratch to his skin. The boy missed a step. Blake thrust near his ear. The boy put up his free hand.

"You concede?" Blake yelled.

A feminine voice said, "If your sword was shorter, I could take you down."

Cassie? *Oh, my God, I have not gone mad.*

He started to rip off her mask but stopped himself. Did he want these lounging soldiers to see him almost out-fenced by a woman? Blake raised his hand to pause the match. She stood still. He walked to the equipment cabinet where he exchanged his sword for one shorter than hers.

Returning to the middle of the esplanade, he ordered, "Follow me." He led her to a wide bench set against the fort's brick wall. "To overcome my height advantage, stand on this. When I draw first blood, more than a few

drops will fall.” Under his breath, he mumbled, “In fact, you may need stitches.”

Cassie stepped up onto the bench. Though he wasn’t sure why, his anger grew. He missed her, and here she was. Now, how could he get rid of her fast?

Skipping the “*en garde*,” he swung at her. She feinted to avoid him. With each thrust, he came closer. He could smell fear rising from her. *I must best this woman and drive her out of my life. If I don’t, I will be of no use to the Duke or my country.*

He battled as if she were his enemy. He jabbed from one side and then the other until her head twisted and her feet stumbled. She reached the edge of the bench and fell to the ground. Instead of helping her up, he shoved his booted foot on her stomach. He pointed his sword at her breastbone. An inch lower, and he could kill her.

“Concede,” he roared.

She squeezed her gloved hand around the tip of his blade. “Milord, I concede. Grant me mercy.”

Blake let out his breath. He felt as if he had shrunk. His clothes felt too big. Around the esplanade, every man stood transfixed by their battle. Blake didn’t want them to

discover he'd taken down a woman. He stomped his foot in the sand and offered his hand.

"Don't remove your mask," he said.

"I won't. But most of these men know I'm a girl. They wouldn't let me borrow a sword and fencing outfit until I told them I won Valor from you in a billiards match."

He wanted to laugh, but he held himself together. He needed to take her far away from these soldiers who were hooting at him.

~ ~ ~

Cassie had to run to keep up with Blake. He grabbed his cloak and dragged her down the north side of the Fort. This close to the English Channel, clouds covered the sky. To her right flowed the River Medway. Near the river, the land would be marshy. Ahead she spotted a grove of trees. They needed privacy. Since she, Stephen, and her father left Mayfair early this morning, she'd rehearsed what she wanted to tell Blake. Now her brain turned blank.

He hustled her to the center of the trees. She removed her mask and shook out her hair. He liked her hair flowing, and she wanted him to be not quite so angry. He grasped her

shoulders and kissed her so hard she rose up on her toes. She slid her arms under his jacket. With a stroke of her hands, his back muscles tensed. His male organ stood at full attention. Turning his head sideways, he streamed small kisses across her cheek to the special spot beneath her ear. As sparks cascaded through her body, Cassie gasped, moaned, and made other incoherent sounds.

When he lifted his head, she said, "I brought Valor. For the coming war."

He lay his cloak on the ground and pulled her down beside him. He breathed in her ear. "You came by yourself?"

Though she didn't want these enchanting sensations to end, she made him stop. She had important things to tell him. "Stephen and my father accompanied me. Tomorrow, my father and I will return to River's Leap. Yesterday morning, you failed to mention you were headed off to join Wellington's Army. You stunned me by saying we didn't suit."

His passion quieted, Blake looked off through the trees.

He doesn't want to hear what I have to say. I'm going to tell him anyway.

"Cassie, why are you hounding me? Taunting me? Terrorizing me?"

She grabbed his ears and made him look at her. "Listen to what I have to say. Then I will leave you alone. I have practiced the following speech all day. You can ask questions afterward, but for now, don't interrupt."

He closed his eyes.

Cassie let go of his ears. "Yesterday, I didn't tell you how I feel about you." Could she remember what she wanted to say, not just the ideas but the exact words? She took a breath. This brought the beginning of the speech back to her mind. "I love my father and my sisters. I love Stephen as the dearest friend I've ever had."

The last statement earned her a blink of his eyes.

She trembled inside. "But I am in love with you. Regardless of your objections, some of which have merit, I want to marry you. However horrible our offspring may be, I want to have your children."

Blake opened his eyes. "You may think you know me, but you don't. My darker side. My foul behavior. Eventually they will drive you away."

She leaned forward until her face was inches from his. "I know you better than you want me to. I know the excitement of doing

something dangerous. Not because I have some noble purpose, but just for the thrill. I will never understand the horrors you saw in war, but I understand why they haunt you. Unlike most women, I've pictured you in battle."

His eyes opened wide. "Watching someone die? Excited to kill him?"

She touched his cheek. He didn't shy away. "You wouldn't be a good soldier if you flinched at killing."

He took a ragged breath. "There is more wrong with me."

"You already know my shortcomings. Tell me yours."

"I'm terrible at courting."

She grinned. "Your courting won my heart."

"I don't know how to be a good husband or father."

Because of his absent father, he had no example to lead him. "You want to be good at both. You are a man who seeks perfection and is never satisfied with less. If necessary, you can ask my father for advice."

"I encourage your adventurous spirit."

Oh, yes he did. Cassie savored every adventure he'd led her on. From climbing trees

at Green Garden to climbing a willow tree at Cold Harbour along with every wild minute before, between, and since. "I didn't at first, but I agree with you now. I don't want to change who I am, but I must control my worst instincts. If I succumb to a wayward thought, you can either convince me to abandon the scheme or help me carry it off."

He licked his upper lip. "We would fight like wildcats."

"I like fighting with you."

"In a marriage, someone has to be in charge."

"As an officer, you give orders and you take orders. Do you want to marry a meek woman who obeys your every command?"

His hand caressed her waist. Was she making progress?

"I shouldn't marry anyone," he said.

She snuggled closer. "A good marriage is talking things out, arguing sometimes, agreeing on what is best for each person and what is best for their family."

"I want you for selfish reasons." His roving fingers were not listening to his words. They trespassed over her hips. "You drive away the demons who torture me. You make me peaceful. But I'm not the best man for you."

“My goodness, you are bossy.” Her carefully controlled temper burst through every restraint. Her voice rose. “You think you should choose a husband for me. I will do that. Not you, not anyone else. Me.”

“I want what’s best for you,” he said, “not what will save me.”

He said “save me”. He believes I can save him. How dare he turn me down.

“You gave me the freedom to choose. I chose you. You are free to do whatever you want. You can wallow in self-loathing, upset your mother and sister even more, and continue as a morose and troublesome bachelor the rest of your life.” Which could be short, depending on how long the war with Napoleon lasted. “Or you can marry me.”

With his free hand, he stroked his long fingers over her palm. She lifted his hand and nestled it on her cheek.

“This is madness,” he murmured. “You are crazier than I am. I’m trying to save you, one of the most decent acts of my life. But you won’t let me. I can’t think straight. First, I must help Wellington finish Napoleon once and for all. Until then, I can make no plans. And no promises.”

“I know,” she said. “When you return, I

will be waiting for you.”

“To continue your assault on me.”

“To court you.”

His pale blue eyes kindled with passion. “Would you like to start this courtship now?” He raised his eyebrows and blinked his eyes at the same time.

Cassie blinked hers right back. “Show me how married people make love.”

His sudden frown took in his whole face from wrinkled forehead to jugged chin. “I can’t do that. I don’t know how.”

“How could you not know how? You’ve done this . . .” She started to say “hundreds of times” but reduced the count. “Lots of times.”

Looking embarrassed, he paused. “I’ve never deflowered a virgin.”

Cassie would not let his lack of experience deter her. “It can’t be much different from the standard way.” She remembered Aunt Patience’s description. Face to face.

Blake’s objections continued. “I’ve been told the woman feels some pain.”

Her aunt had not mentioned this. Her maidenhead breaking could be painful. “I promise not to cry.”

“No screaming,” he warned.

“I will bite my tongue if necessary.” Maybe

this wasn't the right time or place. But she was Cassiopeia Valient who dared to do what other women only imagined.

Blake explored another pitfall. "I have no protection. All my handkerchiefs are in my baggage."

She wondered if other couples negotiated this much before having sex with new partners. "I have a handkerchief." She pulled the "protection" from her breeches pocket.

He fingered the smooth cloth. "Silk. Rather small. With the embroidered letter C."

"You really don't want to do this?"

He nestled her against his chest. "I've run out of excuses."

Oh, dear. She was about to get what she wanted. Her skin and clothes were damp with sweat. So were Blake's. He lay her down on his cloak. She didn't know where her arms should go, so she laced them around his shoulders. His nimble fingers flicked free the buttons of her fencing shirt. In seconds, he had the garment off her arms. A warm breeze fluttered over her exposed skin. He sat up. Flick, flick, flick, and his upper body was naked.

He turned her on her side. He pressed his bare chest against her bosom. She gasped.

When his mouth covered hers, she had to stop gasping. His hands stroked her back. What if someone came upon them? The soldiers would think she was a camp follower.

Back to stroking and kissing and touching. A lot of touching. With one hand, he unbuttoned her fencing breeches. With the same hand, he pushed them, drawers and all, past her hips, then past her knees. While his hand worked her boots off, his mouth slid down her stomach and a little below.

By now, Cassie didn't know where she was or even who she was. His hands, his mouth, his body overwhelmed her. He stretched out to pull off his breeches. She watched everything he did. He arranged her handkerchief over his male organ. She couldn't see much. She didn't want to. She just wanted to feel him inside her.

Quickly, he lay atop her. He lifted up on his elbows, his face shadowing hers. "Tell me you love me."

"I am about to show you," she breathed.

After one last kiss, he thrust inside her. At the sudden shock of pain, she cried out softly. She took deep breaths.

He stayed motionless. "So that's how it feels," he mumbled. "Sorry."

“Give me a minute. Then go slow.”

After waiting until she relaxed, he moved carefully inside her. Back and forth, deep and shallow. Cassie became vividly aware of her interior. Just as slowly, she moved with him, pushing back as he came forward. Over and over, the pace increased. The lovely sensations continued, spreading from her center down her legs, up her torso and out her arms. Her head enjoyed the most wonderful sensations. Tears of joy ran down into her ears. As she stroked his back, everything inside her exploded. Flashes of light, cloud-to-earth lightning strikes throughout her body. The excitement gentled to swirls of pleasure.

A second later, Blake groaned. With one last thrust, he collapsed. He turned her on her side. His eyes closed, his face filled with pleasure. She pleased him. He pleased her. Half a minute later, his breathing slowed. He was asleep.

With part of him inside her, they were attached like one person with four legs. She wiggled her feet. His didn't move. Someone might interrupt them, and she had no clothes on. Careful not to wake him, she separated herself. The handkerchief came out. After covering him with his cloak, she found her

clothes and put them on.

Above her, the wind rustled the leaves. In front of her, horses grazed in the open field, but she saw no people. Cassie picked up the damp handkerchief. She must ask Aunt Patience about this gooey stuff. Across the field stood a line of trees possibly shadowing a creek. As she walked toward the tree line, she held the handkerchief out in front of her. Once there, she swished the silk in the cool, flowing water.

The glow of lovemaking slowly faded. She remembered more than his touch, his caresses, his lips, and the rest. She remembered his words. He seemed delighted that she loved him, but he didn't repeat those words to her. He was grateful she "saved him from his demons". Were these words of praise meant to soften the truth? He wanted to have sex with her. He wanted her to take his mind off his problems. But he didn't want to marry her.

She twisted the water out of her handkerchief. She should leave him here peacefully asleep and travel with her father to River's Leap. When he found her missing, Blake would understand.

From behind, a man's arm crossed her bosom. His hand clamped over her mouth.

Cassie didn't need to turn around. She knew who he was.

Chapter 25

The Gentleman Bandit

Cassie forced her arms tight against her sides. Through his hand, she said, "Mr. Durgan, I won't cry out." He took his hand away. "May I turn around?"

How had the man found them? He must have followed her and her father all the way from Mayfair. There had been so much road traffic, she hadn't noticed Durgan and his daughter among the travelers.

"Not yet." His voice had the lilt of a man happy with himself.

Though her heart beat like horses' hooves, she must appear calm. "Is your daughter Ruth with you?"

"I am," the girl said.

Cassie thought about dropping Dangerous Dan to the ground as she had Stephen at Cold Harbour. However, that technique didn't always work smoothly. The commotion would rouse Blake. He would fly to her rescue. Except, he didn't have any weapons, let alone

clothes on. Before he hustled her into the grove of trees, he'd dropped his sword on a bench. Dan and possibly Ruth would be armed. Pistols, daggers and who knew what else. Someone would be injured. Someone might die.

"Now, pretty lady," the outlaw said, "I ask you to put your hands on top of your head and turn around slowly."

There he stood, the man she once hired to kidnap her. Not much taller than herself, he wore a green mask over his eyes. His black eccentric hat, short with a small brim, cocked at a rakish angle over his left eye. His clothes bespoke a down on his luck gentleman; ruffled shirt, leather hunting jacket and boots, black wool trousers. With the same coloring as his daughter, his dark eyes shown through his mask. Near his temples, his wavy russet hair had a touch of gray. From what she could see of his face, he was handsome; smooth skin, generous mouth, wicked grin. His lithe body looked more suited to dancing than derring-do.

Keeping her voice low, she said, "You seek the balance of the money I promised you. Though you didn't complete the assignment, I am a woman of my word."

“We agreed on fifty pounds. I don’t wish to discomfit you, but I have urgent need of the funds.”

Without thinking, she replied, “Forty-six pounds. In Hyde Park, we paid your daughter about four pounds.”

He squinted at her. “Fifty will cover the delay you have caused me.”

“Fifty it is.” She was amazed at her calm demeanor. “At any moment, Lord Rayneford will awaken. He is heavily armed,” she lied. “He is a Colonel in the British Army. For years, he fought Napoleon’s troops on the Continent. He is used to killing people. Ruth has seen him in action.”

The girl tugged on her father’s jacket. “Let’s be getting on with this.”

“Of course, I don’t have that much money with me,” Cassie said. “If you allow me some time, I can gather the amount promised.”

What was she thinking? Who would she ask for help? Blake? He’d want the twosome arrested. His mother? Blake controlled her funds. Uncle Sydney? He would agree with Blake to deliver Dan and Ruth to the Sheriff. Her father would help, but at present he had little cash with him.

“I’ll need a few days,” she said.

With a spread stance, the outlaw slapped his gloved hands on his hips. "I think not. If you must travel somewhere, my daughter and I will accompany you. We require specifics of where we are going and how you will secure the funds."

"So this is, in fact, a kidnapping?" Cassie said.

"What a coarse accusation. Let us call it a negotiation. Where are we headed, sweet lady?"

Think fast before Blake discovers I'm missing.

At River's Leap, all the repair funds hadn't been paid out. Plus, her father had cubby holes with odd bits of petty cash. If she searched, she could probably find loose coins in the chair cushions.

"Take me to my home in Sherwood Forest. There, I can lay hands on most of what I owe you. And there is my mother's jewelry."

"We have enough jewelry, thank you. I don't have time to recut the stones."

Gentleman Dan knew how to recut precious stones?

Again, his daughter tugged his sleeve. "We plan to dress like high society. I could wear the jewels." When her father continued to frown, she said, "Pa, this lady is offering more

than we have now. We can stretch our funds until we reach America.”

Gently, the man put his hand over his daughter's. He smiled at her. Turning to Cassie, he asked, “Where exactly is your home?”

“Five miles above Nottingham on the River Trent.”

“That's at least a three-day ride. You have no closer resources?”

Ruth tapped his lapel. “That's near where we plan to leave from. We get the money, pack our belongings, and then we're off to Liverpool for passage to the New World.”

Dangerous Dan grabbed Cassie's arm. “Fine day for an outing. Shall we be on our way?”

She dug her boot heels into the marshy soil. “If I disappear, Lord Rayneford will think I've been kidnapped.” Her mind swarmed with competing thoughts. What lies could she make this man believe? First, she had to let Blake know where she'd gone and why. “The day you were supposed to kidnap me, Blake Forester discovered my plan to steal 600 pounds from him. Because I couldn't carry through on my plot, he forgave me. Ever since, he has ‘extracted’ his reward.” These two must

have guessed what she and Blake were doing a few minutes ago. "You've heard how he dispatched your brother Miles. Blake will make sure you leave me alone permanently. To protect himself from embarrassment, he will track you down and kill you."

Nervously, the outlaw shifted his feet. "He doesn't know where we're headed."

"He can send soldiers to search in every direction. He will raise a cry across the country." In truth, with Napoleon about to attack somewhere on the Continent, Blake would have to find her by himself. Maybe Stephen would help. "I must leave him a note."

Dan led her toward the river where two saddled horses waited. "A note, really. You think I am that bumble-brained?"

"I will tell Blake I am breaking off with him and returning to London. He will think, 'good riddance'. He's done with me anyway. Just now, he's headed for Dover for transport with the Army to Belgium."

"You are sure he's not good for the money?"

She wanted to turn and see if Blake had stirred, but she dared not. Instead, she focused her eyes straight ahead. "After I got to know

him, I discovered he couldn't pay the ransom even if he wanted to. Long on land. Short on cash." How much research had the Gentleman Bandit done as to the value of Green Garden's holdings?

"I need pencil and paper," she said.

With a sigh of disgust, Mr. Durgan withdrew a notebook from his saddlebag. He slid a pencil out of the spine. "Write on a back page."

She flipped to near the end. There she scanned the description of a country intersection, the location of trees, and a secluded side road. These pages must be a list of locations to rob carriage passengers.

She stared at the next blank page. *How do I let Blake know I'm headed for River's Leap so he can follow us? By now, he must be thoroughly disgusted with having to protect me from criminals.*

She started to lick the pencil tip, then thought better of it. In her neatest hand, she printed,

Dear Blake Rayneford, Lord of Green Garden manor. You were Right. Let us part as friends. I Really Love Stephen. I don't Really Love you. Among the English, use of capital letters was erratic. She hoped Blake noticed and Mr.

Durgan did not. She added, *P. S. thanks for the flowers.*

Cassie traced some letters to make them stand out. She handed the note to Ruth who read the words, looked at Cassie, and nodded. The girl's father didn't look at the paper. Either he trusted his daughter more than he should, or he was in a desperate hurry.

Cassie said, "Take me back near where Blake is sleeping."

As they walked, she folded her message into a paper dart. When she came close to Blake, she gauged the wind and sent the dart flying through the air.

~ ~ ~

An hour later, Blake woke with a start. He sat up and looked around. Where was Cassie? Did he offend her by not offering to marry her? Later, he would review his choice of words. Right now he had to find her. He hurried into his breeches, shirt, jacket, and boots and got to his feet.

Not too loudly, he called, "Cassie."

He didn't want to attract soldiers or upset the grazing steeds. He walked around the field. At a little stream, he found her handkerchief, the one he'd recently soiled but

was now washed clean. He stuffed the cloth into his pocket.

Damn. Where had she gotten to? She wasn't the kind to play the minx. She had enjoyed their lovemaking. For himself, he'd had the most love-filled sexual experience of his life. He found the paper dart. He read the words. He started to smash her letter into a ball. Instead, he unwrinkled the paper and read it again.

He had to find her. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Her adventures, he'd join her on them. If she wanted to, she could dress like a man all the time. Regardless of how lawless their tiny heirs might be, she should birth bunches of them. He raced across the field and down the side of Fort Clarence. Stephen and James brought her. Maybe she was with them. Blake dodged among the soldiers, even broke through a marching troop to get to his friend.

As he ran, he shouted, "Where's Cassie?"

Stephen yelled back. "She was with you. What have you done to drive her away?"

"Nothing, I don't think. Maybe something. She's gone." He thrust the wrinkled note at Stephen. Her father joined them. Should James see the note? Shaking his head, Stephen

read quickly. He handed the paper to James.

“This is impossible,” his friend said. “You know Cassie doesn’t love me.”

Her father took longer to read. “This is not my daughter’s usual penmanship. She writes in a rush. Look at her use of capital letters. Four times, she writes a word beginning with capital letter R followed by a word beginning with a capital L. For River’s Leap. She intends to go there. But why return home without me, and why deliver this message in code?”

Blake reread the last line. “P. S. Thanks for the flowers.” Did P and S mean the potting shop?

“Where’s Valor?” Blake asked.

Stephen grabbed his arm and they set off in a run. “She rode him here from London. Her valise is attached to his saddlebag.”

James ran after them. The three reached the hitching rail where the war horses were tied. Twice they walked up and down the row. Valor was missing.

Stephen said, “She wants you to follow her. And you can guess who she’s with. We’ll find horses and go after them.”

Blake removed Stephen’s hand from his shoulder. “You must stay here. We’ve accepted our commissions and mustered in. If we leave

without permission, we will be absent without leave. Take my note to our commander. Explain the circumstances, and ask him to issue me official leave. I don't have time to go through all those steps now. James, come along and show me the fastest way to River's Leap."

"You're sure?" Stephen said.

As he did only after battles, Blake hugged his friend to his chest. "The troops at Dover are delayed for lack of transport. I can ride to River's Leap and be back in a week. James and I may intercept them even sooner along the road."

Blake recognized his friend's sad frown. Stephen's face read, I disagree with your decision but I will not stop you. True to his nickname, he found pencil and paper in his pockets. Using Stephen's back as a flat surface, Blake wrote the particulars in military language. Then his friend trotted off toward the Commandant's office.

Blake went looking for the horse he rode in on. Along the way, he gathered two pistols with shot, an assortment of dirks and daggers, and his favorite finishing touch, a length of rope.

Cassie's father hurried to catch up. "Since

she is my daughter, you will apprise me of what she's gotten herself into?"

"I will. To begin, I will tell you how she arranged her own kidnapping. Now you tell me if she can raise fifty pounds at River's Leap."

"Kidnapping? She intends to ransom herself for fifty pounds?"

"Something like that. She hopes we will rescue her first."

"The workmen haven't finished yet. We have cash left to pay for the flood repairs. There's always some money about for household expenses. It might be enough."

Twenty minutes later, Blake and James crossed the River Medway Bridge. Until now, Blake lacked the time and privacy to answer James's questions. Passing through the village of Strood, they turned onto the carriage road that led north.

Blake pulled up beside Cassie's father. "As you know, the first time I met Cassie, she emerged from her overturned carriage. She mistook me for Dangerous Dan Durgan, the Gentleman Bandit. Have you heard of him?"

"He robbed my sister. Patience extolled his genteel treatment of her and her friends."

"To avoid having to marry me," Blake

continued, "Cassie arranged for Durgan to kidnap her for ransom."

James said nothing. He didn't flinch, didn't grimace, didn't even act surprised. Blake outlined the rest of her scheme.

James nodded. "She did object to even meeting you."

"She arranged the kidnapping to save River's Leap."

James looked sad. "She told me she was involved in a crime. Planning her own kidnapping would qualify. But you stopped her."

"She stopped herself. Believing I was Durgan, she couldn't let me die at the end of a noose." Blake decided to omit their passionate kiss and her wish they could migrate Down Under.

James spoke up. "You believe this Durgan fellow kidnapped Cassie to get his share of the ransom."

"If you or I pay him, he'll keep asking for more. He must be stopped."

James said, "Surely, you don't intend to turn him over to the Sheriff. To keep from hanging, the man will tell all he knows."

"I'll take care of him."

This time, Blake would not ship the man

and his daughter off to some foreign land. He'd make sure Durgan died in as much misery as possible. As for Ruth, he didn't know what to do with her. On their ride north, he would ask James about the terrain around River's Leap; deep ponds, sink holes, caves, abandoned wells, boggy swamps. Places where the Sheriff might convince himself the outlaw met his death by misadventure.

James sighed. "Why did you allow my nefarious daughter to visit you at Green Garden?"

"Ah, well. I . . ." What word to use? He hadn't been in love. Their first meeting was too soon for such nonsense. Not afraid for his reputation because he had none worth protecting.

James offered, "You were smitten?"

"More than that." Blake experimented with other adverbs. "Enchanted. Enthralled. Beguiled, perhaps. Bewitched, bemused, besotted."

James laughed. "Your amorous attraction is the reason you bought the debts of men who owed me money."

Blake slowed his horse. "Cassie told you?"

"No. Grace did last night. I appreciate your help. I will be delighted to make the contracts

legal with my signature.”

This man knew Cassie better than Blake did. He may not approve of her behavior, but her father supported whatever she did.

For several miles, they rode in silence.

James finally asked, “What other secrets should I know about my daughter?”

How much should he tell the man? Before Blake pondered as long as he should have, he blurted out, “First, she is no longer a virgin. Second the Durgans, whose real surname is Fitzhenry . . .”

James put up his hand. “Back up a notch. How do you know Cassie is no longer a maiden?”

He wanted a description? “Because I, uh. After the fencing match . . . Did you see the match?”

James glared at him.

“Afterwards, we went into a little wood behind the fort. Wait. First, she told me she loves me and she wants to marry me and have children who, unfortunately, may take after their parents.”

“And?” James prompted.

“And she wanted to experience what she had never experienced before.”

“She said that?”

“Yes. I tried to convince her otherwise, but she insisted.” Blake made her sound like a Siren. “She was nervous. And I didn’t put up much resistance.”

He was afraid to look at Cassie’s father.

“Good for you,” James said. “I assume you used protection.”

This conversation grew stranger and stranger. How could a father compliment the lover who diminished his daughter’s marriage value?

“I did. Why, uh, why would you be glad that I . . .?”

James shifted in his saddle. “Since we are sharing Cassie’s secrets, I will tell you my fears. At River’s Leap, she used to walk out with young men. Not just to dances or strolling. They went fishing, hunting, rock climbing, exploring caves. Unchaperoned of course. I tried to stop her, but once Cassie gets an idea, she goes ahead, consequences be damned. Her forwardness can be unladylike. I wondered if she did more with any of those boys than she admitted to me.”

Blake wondered too. “Until a few hours ago, she remained pure as a snow white dove.”

James seemed satisfied. “Tell me what

happened the day and night when you, Stephen, and the little boy . . .”

“Ben Fitzhenry.” Blake said. “That evening, we captured Dan Durgan’s brother who tried to carry out the original ransom plan. We took him to Pimlico Dock where I had arranged for him to be transported to Australia.”

As they rode toward Sherwood Forest, Blake contemplated James’s bizarre reaction to his revelations about his eldest daughter. He wondered what Cassie’s sisters were like.

Chapter 26

River's Leap

Early evening two days hence, Blake and his new comrade James Valient rode into the small market town of Peterborough. On their journey north from Fort Clarence, they had stopped at taverns and inns where they bought drinks for notorious-looking characters. The last time Blake saw her, Cassie was dressed as a boy. On the two occasions he'd met her, Ruth was outfitted the same. He assumed the girl was with her father. So he made inquiries about an older man travelling with two lads. Some of their drinking companions mentioned where and when they had seen the trio. Though Blake and James arrived an hour or more late each time, the information confirmed Cassie, Dan, and Ruth were headed for River's Leap.

A late supper at the town's seediest inn led to chatting with a pretty waitress. She accepted his invitation to sit with them.

Blake shot her a toothy smile. After what,

for him, passed for flirting, he broached their standard question. "We're on the lookout for an older man travelling with two boys. They owe us money."

Not in the least taken with his charm, the young woman crossed her arms. "I'll tell you what I did see. An older man, quite handsome. With two young ladies. The women had on men's clothes, but I could tell. Something's going on there. One whore at a time, I say. And dressed like boys. Such doings are not right."

Blake smiled. "You have found us out. Those three are precisely who we seek. One of the women is new to the trade. He expects to sell her as a virgin. We must rescue her before . . . Well, you know. Before. Have they taken lodging here?"

"They ate and left. Bought a loaf of bread and some bacon to take with. They headed north."

A campfire breakfast, so the Durgans weren't staying at any inn tonight. "When did they leave?"

"Thirty minutes ago. Maybe a little more."

Blake slipped the girl a shilling and kissed her forehead.

The horses needed more rest, but up to

now, he and James hadn't been this close to rescuing Cassie. Saddled up, they galloped through town and across the River Nene Bridge.

Within an hour, they trotted up a small rise. From the high ground, Blake put his spyglass to his eye. On all sides lay farm fields, flat land with few trees. On his second scan around, he saw people, inches high in his glass, at the edge of a tree line. He squinted. Three of them. He moved the glass until he found three horses grazing nearby.

He handed the glass to James. "Do you see them?"

"My eyes are not as strong as yours, but I see horses and people in a place they shouldn't be this close to twilight."

"The tree line extends to this road. It's near eight o'clock. The Durgans may be bedding down for the night."

James's face was a stone mask. In their fight to capture the Durgans, Cassie could be hurt. Surely, her father knew the danger. Tough fellow. He'd put up with Cassie's adventures for years. He must be steeled to any possibility.

Arriving at the tree line, Blake and James tied their horses in reach of tall grass but out

of sight. Hunched down, they crept through the undergrowth. In aid of their mission, a friendly breeze rustled the trees. As they came closer, Blake heard voices. He couldn't make out the words, but he heard Cassie speaking. He surveyed the scene. Horses tied to trees behind the threesome, an open field in front. Under the trees, the Durgans had laid out bedrolls. Cassie looked toward Blake. To her left, the father and daughter bandits stood facing away from him. Quickly, Blake stood up and waved to Cassie. Just as fast, he crouched back down.

He beckoned James near. "You come up from the right. Take Ruth from behind. Pin her arms against her waist. I'll take Durgan in the same manner."

Blake raised his dagger from its sheathe. Cassie must have seen him. She walked farther away from the Durgans. When she looked directly at him, he tapped James. They advanced together. The sighing wind covered their footfalls. With James in position, Blake crouched to pounce. Durgan must have noticed something because he lunged for Cassie. A small knife between his teeth, the outlaw hugged her, face to face, against his chest.

Blake knew what to expect next. He couldn't interfere, but his heart filled with terror for Cassie's life. As Durgan lifted his right arm to grab his knife, she jerked her left arm up. Just below the man's elbow, she shoved her fist sideways. For a moment, she was free of him. Knife in his hand, he grabbed for her again. She shot her knee up and smashed into his balls. As he doubled over in pain, she slammed her fist in an undercut to his nose. Her attacker staggered backward. Blood exploded from his nostrils.

Blake ran toward them. He pried the knife from the groaning man's fingers. He rolled Durgan over and sat in the middle of his back. "Cassie, get the rope from my saddlebag."

When she returned, her hands shook.

"Does your father have Ruth secure?"

Her lower lip trembling, she nodded.

Damn, this was Cassie's fault. Along with Durgan, she too should suffer.

He handed her Durgan's knife. "Cut me two pieces, each three feet long."

Blake glared at the man beneath him. "You realize I'm going to kill you. I haven't chosen which method yet. Your death must pass as an accident. Your body will not be found for a long time. So long your skin will have rotted

and no one will recognize your face. At the bottom of an abandoned well? Drowned in a nearby river? Which do you prefer, the Neve or the Trent? We're not far from the North Sea. For that, I would need a boat."

Cassie measured the rope, tip of her nose to her outstretched fingers. She cut the first piece. "Blake, we don't . . ."

"I am in command," he ordered. "This man will never blackmail you again."

She handed him the piece of rope.

"Durgan," he said, "put your hands behind you. Cassie, tie them together just as we did with his worthless brother."

For an experienced outlaw, the man didn't put up much of a fight. Blake expected him to break into tears and howls of "Spare me!"

Instead, the man spoke to Cassie. "I deserve whatever fate Lord Rayneford devises. Please take care of Ruth. I wanted the money for her. You know I did."

Cassie tied the knot tight enough to hold but not enough to cut off his circulation. "Blake, you must hear me out."

Blake propped the outlaw against a tree. "Tie his feet. Then we will see to Ruth." He had a certain respect for Durgan's daughter. She helped them capture Miles.

His arm around Ruth's shoulder, James held the girl's head against his chest. He patted her back like a father would an upset child. The Valient family was entirely too soft-hearted toward criminals.

Blake stood in the middle of the group.

Cassie took his arm. "You're not going to kill him."

"I will if you let me."

"I won't."

He moved her out of the outlaw's hearing. "I'll rough him up, though you did a great job injuring him. Then I will deliver him to the nearest sheriff. No specific charges, just state he is the infamous Gentleman Bandit."

Cassie sniffed like tears might be coming. "The judge will sentence him to hang."

"Which he deserves. Durgan will prefer a noose to what I threatened. If he has money saved, he can buy himself an appeal. A bribed judge might transport him to Australia where he can reunite with his brother." With Durgan's years of crime, that outcome seemed unlikely.

"What about Ruth?"

"Maybe the court will send her along with her father."

Cassie squared her shoulders. He looked

forward to the explosion that should follow. She'd been upset. Now she was angry. "I know Dan Durgan deserves the noose. But think what his death will mean to his daughter. Please listen to their plan."

The outlaws had a plan? Bone weary from the day's ride, Blake motioned the rest of them to sit on a quilt spread under the trees. They were close enough for Durgan to add to the conversation. Ruth sobbed softly against James's shoulder.

Blake turned to Cassie. "Tell me their story. At the moment, Ruth seems overcome."

Cassie glanced at the criminals. "Mr. Durgan and Ruth, please correct me whenever I misspeak." She looked at her father. "I owe this man fifty pounds. I will explain my reasons later."

Blake said, "I already told him. He's quite sanguine about your kidnapping scheme."

"He is?"

Blake felt sympathy for none of this bunch. He adored Cassie, but right now, he was fed up with the Durgan/Fitzhenry family as characters in her adventures.

"You were about to apprise me of their plan," he growled.

"Ruth said fifty pounds would fulfill her

father's longtime dream. He wants to quit the family highway robbery business, move to the United States, and open a jewelry shop."

"Durgan is a jeweler?"

"Quite talented, Ruth claims. Over the past several years, he's recut his stolen gems and put them in new settings. That way, the original jewels can't be identified. From robberies and ransoms, he's accumulated a good deal of cash. Sometimes he works for a jeweler in Manchester. He can't quit because the shop owner suspects Daniel Fitzhenry may be a famous outlaw."

The Gentleman Bandit is being blackmailed. How fitting.

"Why does he need an additional fifty pounds?"

From behind him, Blake heard a strangled voice. The man had trouble speaking through his battered nose. "Except for Ruth, my crimes have lost me the respect of the rest of my family. We Fitzhenrys are of noble birth, though not the respectable kind. We had an estate in Sherwood Forest. My great-grandfather ran afoul of swindlers and lost most of the property. By buying and refashioning stolen jewelry, my grandfather financed our life as gentry folk. My father cut

out the middle men by adding burglary to our criminal enterprise. For excitement I suppose, I added highway robbery and ransom. My wife left me. My two sons went off to the war and never returned.”

Blake tested him. “They died in the war? What battles?”

“They came back to England alive. I had used them in my larcenous trade. They enlisted to escape my hold over them. Ruth alone stayed with me. Soon she will be sixteen. I want to bring her out in society. To make a good marriage, we can’t remain in England. Too many suspect our family history.”

Durgan leaned back against the tree. Blood from his nose was forming scabs. His groin must ache. If what he said was true, maybe he’d been punished enough.

“Ruth,” Durgan said. “Tell Lord Rayneford the rest.”

James offered Ruth his handkerchief. She wiped her face and blew her nose. “My father turned sour when you cut short the kidnapping plan. I had to force him to keep working in the shop. He wouldn’t plan more robberies. I told him what you did to Uncle Miles. That upset him. Family is family after

all. That's when he decided to try the ransom scheme again." Catching her breath, she rested against James's shoulder.

Cassie took up her story. "From our repairs fund, household accounts, and farm income at River's Leap, I believe we can cobble together their share of the ransom money. Dan and Ruth need clothes suitable for society and money for passage on a ship out of Liverpool. When they arrive in the United States, they will rent a house in a prosperous neighborhood. With his reset gems for stock, her father intends to open a jewelry shop nearby. If they meet anyone from England who recognizes their last name, the Fitzhenrys will claim they inherited money from a relative."

Blake looked at James. "This time, Cassie will be stealing money from you."

Her father frowned. "I would rather not involve the local sheriff. Murder can have complications. Unexpected witnesses. Clues left behind. Ruth seems a fine person. God help me, but Cassie is my daughter. I see no better way than to accept the Gentleman Bandit's plan."

Cassie's face showed regret, sorrow, and guilt. "The rest of my life, I promise to never

do anything adventurous again.”

Blake loved her daring spirit. He'd make sure she didn't keep that promise. “Well, are we sleeping here in the woods tonight, or taking two rooms at an inn?”

~ ~ ~

Near sunset the next day, Cassie dismounted in front of River's Leap Manor. Would her stupid, dangerous scheme finally end tonight? She dared not think of Blake's reaction to her latest scrape. She had interfered with his military responsibility, put him in danger, and might cost him more money. She kept giving him reasons not to love her. Deal with one problem at a time, she instructed herself.

Blake helped the Durgan/Fitzhenrys down from their horses. Dan's wrists were still tied, but Blake undid his feet so he could walk. Samuel rushed down the steps to greet them. Blake asked the man to see to their horses. Then he grabbed the outlaw's arm and stumbled him up the steps and through the open doorway. Cassie followed with her father and Ruth.

In the foyer, her sisters Selene and Lyra ran to welcome them. The girls hugged and

chattered at Cassie and their father until they noticed the other guests.

Cassie made introductions. "This is my friend Blake Forester, Lord Rayneford."

Both girls gaped, wide-eyed. They rarely met nobility, and he did cut a striking figure.

"These two strangers . . ."

Blake glowered at Cassie. "You are aware of your eldest sister and her breathtaking adventures. This one tops the list, we hope for all time."

She had to reveal some of the truth. "Dear sisters, I owe these two strangers fifty pounds, which I must produce immediately. I have no choice but to find every scrap of cash in the house. Will you help me?"

Her sisters looked at each other, jumped into the air, and yelled, "Yees."

Her father headed for his office. "I have pound notes and specie locked in my desk drawer."

Lyra said, "I have coins in my ceramic cat bank. With a knife, I can slide them out through the slot." She turned to Selene. "And you have spare change hidden under your handkerchiefs."

Before Cassie could say "thank you", her giggling sisters flew up the staircase and out of

sight.

She led Blake and her erstwhile captors into the dining room. When her father returned, he counted out 35 one-pound notes on the table. He spilled out a pile of coins. Blake fished in his pocket and added two more pounds.

Cassie said, "You'll need money to reach Dover."

"I'll stop in London," he said. "Mother will be delighted to see me."

"I'll get my mother's jewelry from my satchel," Cassie said.

Her father looked sad but didn't object. Then he brightened. "Blake, escort our new 'friend' upstairs. Ruth mentioned they must buy suitable clothing for their new start. I have dress clothes in storage. Ones I've outgrown as they say. I had hoped to drop my weight a stone or two, but I have been unsuccessful." He glanced at Ruth. "Have you any skill with a needle?"

She grinned. "I can let out the cuffs to make them fit. Pa, we can take the clothes as part payment."

He pulled himself up to his full height. His red nose and two black eyes detracted from his attempt at dignity. "I need to see the style

and quality of the garments.”

Selene dashed into the room. “Clothes?” She dumped twelve pennies, two sixpence, and a half crown on the table. “Might this girl . . .” She tilted her head toward Ruth. “Who is a bit shorter than I but otherwise my size, be interested in some excellent gowns? Last year’s styles, I admit, but serviceable.”

“I would,” Ruth said. “We are moving to the United States where the women are a season or two behind.”

Those were the first happy sounds Cassie had heard from Ruth since she burst into tears last evening. Two Durgan/Fitzhenrys, three Valients and one Forester headed up the broad staircase.

Selene asked Cassie, “Why do you owe these people so much money?”

“I will tell you later.” She had never set much of an example for her sisters. When she related her cautionary tale, she would warn the girls, *Don’t do as I do, do as I say*.

Upstairs, the females invaded Selene’s bedroom. The males retired to her father’s room. Selene dove to the back of her wardrobe. She brought out dress after dress. Outfits for riding, for daywear and two ball gowns; one fall, one spring. The collection ran

to eight dresses and two nightgowns. Selene stood Ruth before a full length mirror. She held each dress against the girl.

Again and again, Ruth cried, "Oh, thank you. I love them all."

Next, Cassie's sister pulled open her dresser drawer. "You will need gloves and handkerchiefs. Let me find ones without my initials on them."

While Cassie folded the gowns, Lyra came in shaking her ceramic cat. "With a nail file, I pried out all I could. To get the rest, I need something longer."

They carried the clothes and the bank downstairs where Samuel met them. He was with his wife Catherine, who was governess to the younger girls.

"What is afoot?" he asked.

"Oh, Samuel," Cassie said. "I'll fill you in later. You know of my dealings with the Gentleman Bandit."

Her former protector leaned closer. "Wasn't that to be our secret?"

"Too many know the secret. You are free of your oath," she said. "This is Mr. Durgan along with his daughter. We are amassing funds, clothes, and jewels to pay my debt to him."

Samuel bellowed, "You owe this thief naught."

"Shhh." Cassie put her finger across his mouth. "He believes I do. The two of them will be leaving the country. We are contributing to their success on the far side of the Atlantic."

Blake and the other men walked down the stairs. Her father carried an armload of clothes; suits, cravats, and shirts. He added them to the clothes piled on the dining table. Lyra returned from the kitchen with a case knife. She slid the blade into the cat's head. In ones and twos, coins spilled onto the table.

"Samuel," her father said. "Have we valises and pouches the Durgans might use for transport?"

Samuel had not stopped shaking his head since he came into the room. "Aye, sir, we do. Cathy and I will fetch them."

Blake untied Durgan's hands. While the three girls folded the clothes into small bundles, he and the bandit counted the coins. Durgan argued with Blake over the cost of new clothing versus used garments. The assembled notes and coins reached 38 pounds, three sixpence.

To show them in the best light, Cassie laid

her mother's pearls, diamond earrings, and garnet ring beneath the candelabra. She wasn't much for baubles. But these were gifts from her father to her mother, reminders of his love whenever she wore them.

Mr. Durgan sighed. "We must make do with what you offer."

Blake demanded, "You will head for Liverpool this night."

Ruth spoke up. "We can't. First, we must return home and pack our belongings. I need needles and threads for the taking in and letting out. Assembling our stock in trade and gathering the cash we have will require at least another day. Not to seem too hasty in departing, we must bid farewell to our friends and neighbors. Only then can we hire a carriage and head for the coast."

Cassie felt overwhelmed by her family's generosity and by Blake's faith in her. Maybe not faith, but at least he accepted her plan rather than executing his.

With satchels, valises, and pouches loaded on two overburdened horses, Cassie gave Ruth a hug. "When you settle in America, please write to me. Let me know how the voyage goes and how you're doing. I don't expect a return address, but send your letter to Miss

Cassiopeia Valient, River's Leap Manor, Nottingham, England.”

Ruth pulled her close for a hug. She slipped a small but weighty pouch into Cassie's hand. “I like you Miss Valient. I'm sorry for all we did to discomfit you. I will write if I can.”

As the Durgan/Fitzhenrys rode down the lane, Cassie pulled the pouch from her pocket. Fingering the outside, she recognized the contents. It was her mother's jewelry.

Chapter 27

Sunset, Sunrise

As soon as Cassie closed the door behind their departing “guests”, her sister Selene tapped her on the shoulder. “I gave away my dresses, ones I didn’t much care for but still, to a pair of hooligans. Lyra and I want to hear your entire story. Every awesome adventure, every hair-raising danger.”

Cassie walked them to the dining room. “While I’m confessing, let’s have something to eat.”

Blake squeezed her waist. “I too want to hear about every terrifying moment.”

Cold plates prepared and on the table, Cassie invited Samuel and Catherine to join them. Blake and her father needed sustenance, but Cassie’s stomach rebelled. Her tight nerves couldn’t endure anything more than a glass of milk.

All of them stared at her, and Blake made “ahem, ahem” sounds. Reluctantly, she began her tale from deciding to stage her own

kidnapping for ransom, forged on through mistaking Blake for the Gentleman Bandit, the adventure at Cold Harbour, Dan and Ruth kidnapping her at Fort Clarence, their journey north, and Blake and her father rescuing her near Peterborough. The longer she spoke the faster her words flooded forth. At the end of her recitation, she caught her breath. Her sisters and father asked questions, Samuel shook his head, and Blake beamed a non-stop smile.

When the others finished eating, she said, "Lord Rayneford must leave near sunrise tomorrow. He has at least a four day ride to Dover where he will . . ." She looked in her lap. She couldn't speak the rest of the sentence.

Blake put his arm around her shoulders. "Where I will cross the Channel with other soldiers. In Belgium we will await orders to march to our next battle against Napoleon's Army."

The girls gasped.

Selene said, "You're going to the war?"

"This time, we will finish off the Little Corporal. We will bring peace to the Continent and end France's threat to invade England."

With that dramatic ending, Cassie and her

sisters cleared the dishes. The men headed upstairs. Her bedroom was across the hall from the Manor's only guest room. Cassie slipped out of her clothes, poured water in the bowl, and washed the sweat and dirt from her skin. She pulled a nightgown over her head.

She pushed her arms through the sleeves. *What if he leaves before I wake up?* The sun would rise before four o'clock. She was so sleepy she might not get to say good-bye.

Pulling on a full-length robe, she stepped into the hall.

Her father stood outside Blake's door. "I've brought him one of my nightshirts."

Cassie snatched the garment from his hand. "I'll take it to him."

Her father frowned at her visit to a man's bedroom. Then he smiled at his wayward daughter who did whatever she pleased. After he walked back to his room, she knocked on Blake's door. Holding her breath, she waited. Maybe he was already asleep. If so, what did he wear to bed?

The door swung open. His shirt off, his chest damp, Blake grinned at her. He stepped back, waved her inside, and pushed the door shut.

She handed him the nightshirt.

“Thank you,” he said. “Care to stay a while?”

Fading sunlight peeked through the window. Candles lit the corners of the room.

Cassie followed him to the basin where he had been bathing. “I wanted to thank you and say good-bye and I’m sorry.”

The tension of the last few months covered her up. Between the consequences of her kidnapping scheme and falling in love with Blake, Cassie felt wrung out. Those tears she’d planned to shed backed up behind her eyes. She tried to strangle the cry ripping from her throat. Unintelligible words would follow. Blake put his arms around her. His sweet gesture broke loose the pent-up torrent. She sobbed against his neck. He kissed her forehead and her temples. When she stopped shaking, he dipped a fresh washcloth in the basin and wiped her tears.

With both hands, he smoothed her unbound hair. “Your ordeal is over. I trust Durgan, or whatever his name is, will follow his plan. He loves his daughter and wants a better life for her. Ruth seems determined to make her father into a true gentleman. She might even write to you.” He handed her the soap. “Wash my back?”

As he turned around, Cassie's distress evaporated. What a lovely assortment of muscles he had. A few small scars. Some moles for accents.

She slid the soapy cloth over his smooth shoulders. "I've caused so much trouble. For you, my family, for Stephen. Even for the Durgan/Fitzhenrys."

"You set the kidnapping plot in motion," he said, "and you reaped the punishment. Since you met me, you have not instigated even one outrageous adventure."

"I convinced Dan Durgan to bring me to River's Leap to collect his money."

"You did that to keep me from fighting him. At the tree line, I loved watching you take him to ground, especially the punch to his groin."

"Have I changed enough?" she asked.

Stephen taught her to act like a lady. Blake admired her daring. She was the adventurous lady who brought light to his darkness. And maybe nothing more.

Blake turned around. "I don't want you to change."

He didn't take the soap from her, so he must expect her to wash his chest. Here she examined another marvelous array of muscles.

Platinum chest hair spread across his breastbone. Squeezing the excess water from the soapy rag, she started with his stomach and worked upward. With every stroke, his grin widened. By his collarbone, he was chuckling.

She put the soap in its dish. "You're right. I can't change who I am. But I must be more prudent before I act."

With his fingertips, he raised her chin. With the other hand, he dipped a fresh cloth in the basin.

He handed her the rinsing cloth. "Cassie, you have changed me. Everything my mother told you was true. Plus worse things she doesn't know about. Before I rescued you from your broken carriage, I wallowed in misery and loneliness. I couldn't stand myself, which is why I sought the company of people as wretched as myself. When you revealed your scheme to rob me of six hundred pounds, I was intrigued. I gave up my self-loathing and sadness. You have intrigued me ever since."

"You've intrigued me too." She twirled her finger.

At her command, he turned around. "At first, I wanted you to distract me. When I knew you better, I discovered you are also intelligent, talented, amusing, and passionate.

Where was I? Oh, now I want to protect you.” He pointed his finger to his lower back. “You missed a spot.”

She swiped the cloth across his waist. “With the Fitzhenrys heading for America, I don’t need to be protected.”

“I want to protect you from myself.”

She sidled around to face him. “You are not dangerous.”

“The darkness of soul is still within me.”

Her throat clenched. He said he wouldn’t make any decisions until he returned from the war. When he returns. She would not let herself think of any other possibility.

He grabbed a towel to rub across his chest. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You haven’t.”

“Cassie, I have to believe I can be the man you need.”

“I don’t ‘need’ a man.”

If he loved her, she wouldn’t have to argue with him about getting married. “I can take care of myself. I love you just as you are.” She didn’t know if she could cure his misery, but she was the best candidate for the task.

Blake let loose a ragged sigh, the kind men use when they want to cry but won’t let themselves. She helped him pull her father’s

nightshirt over his head. When he sat on the bed, she brought the basin and bathed his feet. He flinched a little. He must be ticklish. Removing the basin, she set his boots where he could find them. When she turned, he had slipped out of his breeches.

She opened the window halfway. "I'll push back the curtain so the sun will wake you."

She shook out his clothes and laid them on the window seat where the breeze would freshen them.

He stretched his hand toward her. "Sit with me for a while. I promise I'll behave. I'm too tired to do much else."

She shrugged out of her robe. Clad only in her nightgown, she lay on the sheet, her head cradled on the pillow. Blake lay beside her. He kissed her fingertips. She put her arm around his shoulder. He snuggled his face against her bosom. His muscles relaxed. His breathing slowed. His hand slipped off her waist. He was asleep.

During the brief night, Cassie woke once. In the moonlight, Blake looked peaceful. His chest rose and fell. Little sighs came through his mouth. Was he dreaming? Before he had to leave, she intended to spend every minute beside him.

~ ~ ~

A few hours later, Cassie woke to sunlight streaming through the window. She turned over. Eyes open, Blake smiled. She kissed his lips. He kissed her back.

“We have to get up,” she said. “You have a long ride. Best to travel in the morning when the weather is cooler.”

“Better for Valor. I hope his night was as good as mine.”

She threw back the covers and swung her bare feet to the floor. From behind, Blake put his arms around her. She could spend all day making love with him. But Dover was days away, and no one could predict when Napoleon would march his army out of France.

When she reached for her robe, he snatched it away. *What does he want? Just ask, and I will gladly oblige.* She tried again, and this time she got to her feet. Blake scrambled after her. He lifted the skirt of her nightgown, up and over her head. She raised her arms to help him. Through the window, a breeze swept her exposed skin. He stared but not at her face, which was warm from embarrassment. Inch by inch from her neck to her toes, he admired the rest of her.

He made a circle with his finger. At his command, she turned around.

“Oh, my,” he said. “Your backside is as gorgeous as your front. Curves, clefts, angles, shapes. Ohhhhh.”

He sounded like a man judging a prize horse.

Ready to swat him, she turned but then had a better idea. Crossing the two steps between them, she grabbed the bottom of her father’s nightshirt and started to lift.

His hands stopped her. “You saw me undressed last night.”

“Only your upper part. Today, I will inspect your lower part.”

Now he looked embarrassed. Cassie raised the nightshirt. When she reached his neck, he lowering his head and extending his arms. Off the shirt came. She surveyed his equally gorgeous strong thighs and shins. Moving her eyes upward, she filled in that “blank spot” in her imagination.

Without pointing, she said, “Oh my. Your um. Does your, um. Does it always look so, uh? Does it always look like that?”

Blake stared arrows at her. “Only when he’s happy. And right now, he’s very happy.”

Blake thought of his male organ as a separate

person?

She waved her hand, and he turned around. A few scars but nothing life threatening. Fantastic legs, beautiful calves. She wanted to smooth her hands over every part of him. If she started, she'd be at it all day.

He ahemed. "May I turn around now?"

"You may." She reached for her nightgown.

He grabbed the garment. "I'm saving up memories. I need one more."

"I'll have to get a handkerchief," she said.

He dipped into his breeches pocket and took out her embroidered one. "I found this in the stream where you washed it."

She too had memories to make. Cassie started toward the bed, but Blake stopped her. No words passed between them. He would do what he wanted, and she would treasure every moment. His arms around her, he kissed her mouth. He rubbed his body against hers. Could people make love standing up?

He walked her backward to a drape covered patch of wall near the window. While kissing every part of her face and neck, he nestled her back against the satin fabric. He cupped his hands over her behind. As she

stretched up on her toes, he lifted her off the floor. She liked this, skin on skin surrounded by fresh air and sunshine. He lifted her higher. His stomach pressed against hers. She almost floated. With one hand, he curled her leg around his lower back. She did the same with her other leg. She crossed her ankles and grasped her arms around his neck.

Pushing his body in a sensual rhythm, he came into her. New sensations streamed through her. Laughter filled her veins. Her heart beat faster. All her pulses throbbed. Inside, he thrust, back and forth, back and forth. In response, she squeezed her woman part, wide and narrow, wide and narrow. Cassie tilted her head back so he could lick the tops of her breasts. Too soon, the waves of passion consumed her. Don't stop, she wanted to say, but her mouth didn't work. Blake moved inside her, his every muscle concentrated on their sexual dance. Waves of splendor washed over her. Clean and new, she felt bathed in love.

With a groan, he released inside her. Warmth filled her with a new joy. She unfolded her legs. He loosened his hold enough that she could stand on the floor. For a long moment, they held each other, not

moving.

With a deep sigh, he looked at her. "Thank you."

"My pleasure."

When he stepped back, she felt weak. He looked her over as if memorizing all of her. She stood still until he finished. Reality flooded her brain. Blake must leave soon to fight Napoleon.

Finally, she said, "I'll dress and meet you in the kitchen."

By the time he came downstairs, she had eggs cooking in one pan and sausage in another. On the table, she'd placed a tray of sliced honey cake and two dishes of canned apples.

"I put together some items for your trip," she said.

He sorted through the pile on the table. "Soap, razor, towel, nightshirt, two of your father's shirts. Again, thank you."

Cassie slid plates of eggs and sausage onto another tray. Carrying one, she pushed her back against the outside door. "We are eating on the verandah. This day is too beautiful to stay inside."

He picked up the other tray and followed her. Outside, she had already set up the tea

service and cups. Cassie arranged the plates, silverware, and napkins. She looked forward to watching Blake eat. He ate food with such enthusiasm.

When she sat beside him, he already had his mouth full of fried eggs. He swallowed. With his fork halfway to his mouth, he said, "You can cook. I like that talent in a woman."

"I have other domestic skills."

"You told me you were hopeless with most things feminine."

"Not the important ones."

He licked his upper teeth. "I can verify your talent for one other female skill."

She let his remark pass. He wouldn't want to discuss the coming war, but that was all she could think about.

He wiped egg yolk from his chin. "When I stop in London, I'll have my mother send you money to replace the thirty-eight pounds you gave the Durgans."

Cassie twisted her fingers together. "Thank you. As soon as you leave, I will search for employment. I intend to work until I repay not only what we gave the Durgans but the loss you took buying up my father's loans. And the cost of my Season wardrobe."

She would replace her sister's dresses,

though maybe Selene would accept her London ball gowns in payment.

“You don’t need to repay me. I consider you an investment.”

What did he mean by “investment”?
“Honest work will keep me out of trouble.”

“Ah, then, do so. Advertise your expertise in animal husbandry. Enter billiard contests.”

She slapped his arm. “I can read, write, and do sums. I don’t have the patience to be a tutor, but I could work in an office.”

“I’m sure you will be excellent at whatever you attempt. Let’s speak of other things.” He popped an entire slice of honey cake in his mouth.

His cheeks bulged, so Cassie took her turn to speak. “When you return from the Continent, I will court you. I will be just as inventive as you were.”

After several swallows and a half cup of tea, Blake said, “This courtship had better include kisses, caresses, and some adventure, or I’m not interested.”

She kissed crumbs off his mouth.

He gulped down more tea and kissed her again. “When I return, will you be here waiting for me?”

When he returns. This may be the last time I

see him. When he gets to know me better, will he decide I can't make him happy enough to overcome his demons? I will persevere until I convince him we belong together.

“I won't be here. I'll be at the docks in Dover, probably with your mother. We'll watch for you and Stephen and Valor to walk down the gangplank. I promise kisses, and as soon as we find some privacy, whatever else you want.”

He slid his finger over her bottom lip. “Do me a favor.”

“What?”

“When you meet me in Dover, wear a dress.”

Chapter 28

Two Brides

With Stephen's help on his left and a crutch under his good arm, Blake limped down the gangplank. He had a twisted ankle, a sling around his dislocated shoulder, and a dull ache in his head.

The docks at Dover teemed with people, horses, carts, and carriages. A roar of excitement tore through the sea air. Returning soldiers greeted anyone who approached them. Hugs all around. Some of his comrades kissed women, and the women didn't object. He wanted to kiss Cassie. How would he find her when he could barely walk?

Adventure crackled through the air. For three days, they had fought in farm fields south of the now famous village of Waterloo, Belgium. With Napoleon's capture, the Allies victory was one of the greatest battles in history. As their feet touched the dock, Stephen said something Blake couldn't hear. Seeing their officers' uniforms, most of the

crowd stepped aside in respect. Others wanted to shake his hand or hug him. People shouted, "God Bless You", "God Bless England", and "You whipped the bloody Frogs", along with a sprinkle of obscene but enthusiastic phrases.

We killed people. Many were innocent soldiers who didn't want to fight but had no choice. We destroyed several farms, though the farmers cheered us.

When the last shot flew through the air and the last man fell dead, Blake vowed he would never fight again unless an invader threatened Britain. All these years, he had fought Napoleon for that very reason. Damn the generals. They hadn't cut off the tyrant's head yet.

He pulled at Stephen's coat. "I see my mother," Blake yelled.

Stephen led him toward her. She stood alone beside a large carriage. In spite of the pain, Blake tried to walk without stumbling. He didn't want to worry her. When he reached her, she was in tears.

She touched his face and kissed his cheeks. Then she laughed. "Oh, my darling boy. You are home. Safe. Oh, my son. My son."

Blake's turmoil matched his mother's. He was horrified at the fighting they endured,

relieved he and Stephen had survived, and happy to accept congratulations.

He choked out his words. "I am home to stay. I've a little trouble with my foot. You've hired a carriage?"

She nodded. Then she kissed and cried all over Stephen.

From behind the vehicle, James emerged. Blake expected Cassie to appear but she didn't. How long ago had he kissed her good-bye? The time seemed like a year but was closer to three weeks. Was she hiding inside to surprise him? He remembered her last words to him. "I'll meet you at the docks in Dover, probably with your mother."

James looked thrilled and a little weepy. Blake's ears rang from the crowd noise. Stephen and the coachman helped him into the carriage.

Blake had to ask, "Where's Cassie?"

James said, "She and a groom are with Valor. They're bringing your horse down by the animal gangplank. Since Valor knows her, she hopes to convince him to ride in the horse carrier."

Stephen said, "Point me in their direction."

Dodging humans, horses, and conveyances, his friend ran back toward the ship.

Mother sat beside him. "Dare I ask how Valor is? We received word you were wounded but would recover. Valor was also injured?"

Blake rested his sore ankle on the seat opposite. "On the last day of battle, on our last charge, Valor took a bullet in his forearm. When he fell, I fell with him. He got to his feet and I remounted. We finished the battle and helped capture Napoleon. The French forces fled south as fast as they could."

Blake would recover from his injuries enough to function. He had knocked a sergeant to the ground because the man was about to shoot Valor just because the horse limped. His companion these many years would never gallop again. In fact, Valor might never carry a rider again, but Blake would let no one murder his horse.

He looked out the carriage window. He squinted at the gangway where the animals were being offloaded. This far away, he couldn't tell one horse from another.

In the foreground, a blur of blue sped toward him. As it came closer, he recognized Cassie. She wore a blue ball gown; full skirt, deep neckline, puffed sleeves. Her hair displayed a confection of curls highlighted

with small feathers. To run faster, she grabbed her skirt with both fists. She revealed shin high boots.

If he could have leaped out of the carriage, he would have run to greet her. He watched her weave among the people. Some got out of her way, some she had to elbow aside. Strands of her raven black hair came loose and streamed behind her.

She pulled up at the carriage, stuck her hand through the window, and grabbed his nose.

“Let me in,” she cried.

He pried her fingers loose. “Come around to the other side. My foot is elevated.”

His mother moved to the opposite seat. Cassie bundled up her wide skirt and climbed into the coach. She snuggled up beside him. “Kiss me before I come apart completely.”

He surveyed her head to foot. “A ball gown on the docks?”

“You told me to wear a dress. This is my best dress.”

He twined his left arm around her shoulder. His gaze devoured her glistening eyes, her rosy cheeks, her forehead damp with sweat, and her open mouth. He kissed her so deeply his toes curled. He kept kissing her

until they both ran out of breath.

When he released her, Cassie said, "Your mouth works just fine. Stephen will accompany Valor so he isn't upset during the long trip. The horse carrier is set up so he can rest his forelock and knee."

His mother gushed, "This is so romantic."

Like lovebirds, she and James were smack up against each other. Her fiancé had his arm around her, and she clutched James's hand.

Slowly, the carriage rolled through the mob of people.

Mother said, "After a night's rest at an inn, we will visit a few days with Lydia and Phillip. You can rest, and everyone can make a fuss over you."

"How is Lydia doing?" he asked.

"Better than she did when she carried Elizabeth," Mother said. "Hardly sick at all. She doesn't have to stay in bed. Next, we will stop at River's Leap, for a few days rest. Then you and I and Valor will go on to Green Garden."

He was going home without Cassie? Blake couldn't bear to leave her. "Cassie, come with me to Green Garden. Help me convalesce."

She lay her head on his good shoulder. "I would love to, but I have three jobs. Very

early mornings, I am employed at Caswells Bakery in Nottingham. Afternoons, I clerk for the solicitor Sir Reginald Bennington. I've started a third occupation training young women to defend themselves from attack."

She seriously intended to make restitution?
"You don't need to pay me back."

"I'm holding the bakery and legal jobs for men who went off to war. And these women need defensive classes."

"Goodness. With all this income, I shall retire and you may support me."

She poked his ribs. "You can do the womanly chores; child rearing, dealing with the staff, planting the garden, fine needlework."

"Never mind." He turned to James. "You're a doctor, are you not?"

"A degree from Cambridge. Over thirty years in practice."

"Can you treat a twisted ankle, a dislocated shoulder, and a dull headache?"

"You have a concussion?"

"Maybe."

"I know the remedies for all those ailments. Plus I can treat a horse with a forearm injury."

"They taught you veterinary medicine at

Cambridge?”

“No. I learned from our local animal doctor. I can’t accompany you to Green Garden just now. We’re finishing the repairs. We delayed until we got additional funds.”

Blake glanced at his mother. “Remember, I told you they needed a little extra. I lent them . . .”

His mother smiled. “So Cassie could pay off Dangerous Dan and his daughter. She explained everything to me. My son, you are heroic on and off the battlefield.”

Cassie patted his hand. “You’re my hero too.”

“How about a change of plans?” he said. “Instead of Valor and I recuperating at Green Garden under Mother’s ministrations, all three of us stay at River’s Leap until my horse and I recover.” He looked from his mother to James and back. “You can make wedding plans. Saint Peter’s Church in Nottingham would be perfect.”

Cassie’s eyes twinkled. They both remembered Blake and Stephen deciding one or the other would marry her in that ancient chapel. Blake was the only candidate left in the contest.

His mother spoke up. “We didn’t want to

make plans until you returned safe and sound.”

“Here I am. Not quite sound but safe. What do you say? You can get acquainted with the other Valient daughters. They’re both much better behaved than their oldest sister.”

James said, “We would be delighted with your company, but River’s Leap doesn’t have a downstairs bedroom.”

Cassie lit up. “We can turn the school room into a sick room. The door opens onto the back verandah. Father, you always say fresh air and sunshine is the best cure. We’ll move out the tables, chairs, books, and whatever else is in there. We’ll move in some of the guest bedroom furniture. You can be Blake’s doctor. His mother and I will nurse him. All of us can take care of Valor. Each day, I’ll get off work as early as I can.”

Blake leaned back against the thick cushions. His muscles ached from using them in new ways. To avoid seasickness crossing the Channel, he’d eaten sparingly. He should ask if any of them had a few saltines or a pint of water.

When Valor fell and he fell with him, he vowed if he survived, he would marry Cassie and be the best husband and father he could

be. She had not cured him of his demons, but now he knew better how to control them. No more pretending he was in good spirits when he wasn't. He would be honest with her and with everyone else.

~ ~ ~

Cassie knocked on the sick room door. In the two weeks since they'd all returned to River's Leap, Blake had never spoken the word "love" to her.

"Come in," he bellowed. "I am as decent as I care to be."

She swung open the door and kicked it closed behind her. "We received a letter from Ruth."

By the open door to the verandah, Blake sat in his rolling chair. "Your father believes in fresh air and sunshine. Today there is a goodly supply of each."

She rolled his chair through the outside doorway and down the wooden ramp Samuel had built. At the stone sidewalk, she helped Blake to his feet. He no longer needed a crutch, though her father's orders were to stay off his feet most of the time.

"While you were at work today, Valor visited me," he said. "He walks better than I

do. Your father is an outstanding doctor. He could make five times as much money in London.”

With her fingernail, Cassie slit the letter’s seal. “He doesn’t want to be rich. He wants to be helpful.”

“Read to me while we walk along the path. There are some peculiar flowers in the back. I can’t tell if they are domestic or wild.”

If Blake was paying attention to flower varieties, he must be fatally bored. To repair Blake’s concussion, her father advised one and all not to excite or even interest him in anything. His brain needed to rest. Blake wasn’t allowed to see a newspaper. He kept asking what Parliament had decided to do with Napoleon, how repairs to River’s Leap were going, and had they heard any scandalous gossip. They all refused to answer him.

Cassie slid the letter from the envelope. She read:

Dear Miss Valient,

We arrived in Boston, which is in a state with a name I can’t pronounce let alone spell. We found suitable living quarters with space downstairs for our jewelry shop. We are situated on a fashionable street near the sea. We open for

business in a week. We already have customers anxious to view our merchandise.

My father's mood is much improved. Citizens here are very welcoming. This city is alive with shops and factories. Visitors come from the provinces and abroad. People here respect the law though there is not an excessive amount of enforcement.

I hope you are well. Tell Lord Rayneford we are most grateful for his kind treatment. We are forever in debt to both of you.

Yours most sincerely,

Ruth Fitzhenry

Wearing her "I told you so" expression, Cassie looked at Blake.

He sniffed. "Those could all be lies. Right now, the Fitzhenrys may be racing across America, robbing and pilfering as they have for generations."

"The postmark is Boston, Mass," she said. "I'm going to write back, telling Ruth and her father about Beatrice and the children. If Daniel Fitzhenry succeeds in this venture, he should send some honest money to help his grandchildren."

"You want to make a bet whether he will or not?"

"I have faith in Ruth."

What else could she do to enliven his day? He never mentioned his part in the most famous battle in British history. Newspapers had published stories of officers leaving the Duchess of Richmond's Ball in Brussels just before dawn. They rode in carts and wagons to meet Napoleon's Army. After three days of battle, British, Prussian, Austrian, Russian, Italian, Dutch, and troops from other countries routed the French and captured their leader. People in Nottingham talked of the battle incessantly. Yet Blake never commented, and she would never ask him to.

"Oh," she said. "This morning while you were sleeping, our parents chose a date for their wedding."

"It's about time. When?"

"In four weeks. Tomorrow, they travel to Nottingham for a license. They will meet with the vicar of Saint Peter's. He'll read the banns the next three Sundays. Your mother and my father will wed the following Saturday. Will your ankle be sturdy enough to walk your mother down the aisle?"

"Me? Take her down the aisle?"

He still wore a knitted bandage to hold his ankle straight. His shoulder was finally out of the sling, but her father instructed Blake to

limit his movements. Three times a day, Cassie and Grace took turns applying a damp, heated towel to his shoulder. Daily, her father led Blake through stretching exercises for his ankle and his arm.

“I’m sure you can walk that far,” Cassie said. “The aisle isn’t very long.”

“But why do I have to?”

“A bride never goes down the aisle by herself. You will give her away. No one else qualifies.”

He didn’t sound like he agreed with his assignment. “Who makes up the rest of the wedding party?”

“Aunt Patience is your mother’s chief bridesmaid and witness. The lesser bridesmaids will be myself, my sisters, and Lydia if her doctor agrees to the trip. Uncle Syd is best man. Stephen and Phillip are groomsmen. Let’s see, who else? Elizabeth is the flower girl, and Ben is the ring bearer.”

When Blake first arrived, she told him Aunt Pat and Uncle Syd had hired Beatrice to be their live-in maid. The Willoughbys engaged a tutor to teach Ben to read.

Blake turned around. “Four weeks. Who’s making the arrangements? Flowers, food, invitations, whatever else?”

“Grace and I have done some. Stephen arrives tomorrow to deal with the bakery and reserve the inn for out of town guests. The wedding luncheon will be at the inn.”

He walked faster. “Pockets. He’s the best at supplying whatever is needed.”

She had trouble keeping up. “Slow down. You need to favor your ankle.”

“I need to strengthen my leg from hip to toes. You know what? We should have a double wedding. My mother and your father. You and me. Same guests. Same accommodations, same food and flowers. Same vicar. We could save a great deal of money.”

Cassie’s mouth fell open. Did Blake just ask her to marry him?

She lifted her chin. “No. Your mother and I require separate weddings. A wedding may not be important to the groom, but this is the bride’s day to shine. She shows off the man she has convinced to marry her.” Not the best choice of words, but they were true.

Blake frowned. “Our parents can marry at ten o’clock and we can tie the knot at noon.”

Cassie wanted to marry him. But she needed a say in the arrangements. “No. We must have separate receptions, not

overlapping ones.”

He started pacing. She should stop him before he strained his brain with too much thinking. But she didn't want to interrupt while he planned their wedding.

He stopped walking. “Most of the same guests will come to both weddings. Should we expect them to travel from London or from around Green Garden for our parents' nuptials and then return a few weeks later for ours?”

Blake wasn't teasing her. He really did intend to marry her.

“Not the same day,” she insisted. “Nor the day after. Weddings aren't usually performed on Sundays.”

As if she had agreed, Blake nearly shouted, “Monday it is.”

Cassie let out her breath. “Monday it is.”

Two weddings, two receptions in two days would take a lot of planning and fast work. Could they mail both invitations in the same envelope? In this heat, would cut flowers last from one wedding to the next? And she needed a wedding dress.

“Who will be my bridesmaid and witness?” She had no close girlfriends. She couldn't pick one sister over the other.

“Aunt Pat,” he said. “She chaperoned you

through our strange courtship. She'll be here anyway, and she'll already have the right dress. Stephen as my best man. You have a father to walk you down the aisle. I have some ideas for our honeymoon."

She put up her hand. "One thing at a time. Are you officially offering for my hand?"

"You proposed to me. I accept."

How romantic. Oh, well, he's a man. "In spite of how horrible our offspring may be."

Blake shrugged. "I'm not like my sister or my mother. You're not like your father or sisters. You and I are odd ducks. Which is why we belong together."

His words allayed some of her concerns. "You should ask my father."

"He approves of me and I approve of him. What else?"

She couldn't tell him "what else" she wanted to hear. Maybe she didn't need him to say those words.

He led her to a bench. "If you expect me to get down on one knee to propose, I will, but I'm not sure I can get back up again."

"That's not necessary. With our wedding two days after our parents, there will be much to do."

She heard the tension in her voice. She

wanted to remind him she loved him. But he would feel obligated to say the same. Except Blake never felt obligated to do anything he didn't want to. This may be as much commitment as he would ever give her.

Finally, he said, "You're waiting for me to say those three magic words. I. Love. You."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "You're not required to."

He took her chin in his palm. His pale blue eyes enhanced his full face smile. "I've known men who said those words to women, and every word was a lie. Love isn't shown in words but in the way a couple acts toward each other. I am in love with you, and you know why. You put up with me, you listen to me, you are sympathetic. You gave me your virginity. You love me because I'm your hero. I rescued you. Twice."

"Are you keeping score like you did with Stephen?"

She loved him for more than his heroic qualities. If he was interested, she would outline the reasons later. Or she would just show him. He was offering her what she wanted: marriage and children with a man who loved her for her true self.

He chuckled. "I want to spend the rest of

my life with you. We won't always get along.
You will stand up to me. I will get infuriated.
But we will last. Because we're both rebels."

Author's Notes

When I was a student at American University in Washington, D.C., one of my professors was Lord Lindsay of Birker. He asked us to “Call me Mr. Lindsay”.

The class was World Politics. The syllabus was vague. Mr. Lindsay didn't teach from the textbook. Instead three times a week, he shared stories of his adventures in the British diplomatic corps with assignments in China, India, and North Africa. For a time he was a correspondent for Reuters News Agency. His stories were not quite James Bond capers, but they were almost as exciting. They included intrigue, adventure, and a little romance.

Our professor was in his fifties. He wore expensive but baggy suits and occasionally spoke with an upper-class stutter. Outside of class, he rode a Vespa. His wife, Lady Lindsay, was a beautiful Chinese woman. I did not model any of my characters on Lord Lindsay. He was one of a kind.

On another topic, my heroine, Cassiopeia

Valient, has learned traditional karate self-defense. The most popular myth is that in 527 A.D. a monk left India to teach Buddhism at the Shaolin Temple in China's Henan Province. His instructions on how to meditate included exercises to strengthen his followers' bodies and minds. This was the genesis of karate self-defense. By 1507, the people of Okinawa had embraced these techniques. Japan had conquered their island and confiscated their weapons. Karate became the Okinawans only defense against the Japanese invaders.

Long before Marco Polo, trade routes existed between Europe, India, and the Far East. Merchants, explorers, and adventurous tourists followed the Silk Road. Centuries before the canal was built, ships' passengers and cargo portaged across the Isthmus of Suez between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Some of these travelers learned karate self-defense and taught the discipline to other Europeans.

Cassie's protector, Samuel Pennit, is "widely traveled". He could have been a sailor who retired when he became too old for sea voyages. He taught Cassie the simplest self-defense moves. With practice, she could gain

the strength and dexterity to take down an opponent.

In the late 1880's, self-defense classes for women became popular. Techniques for ladies must have been around for some time before that. The unladylike behavior of kneeling a man in his groin or smashing her palm hard enough to break his nose would be frowned on in Regency society. These lessons could only be learned in secret. As we know, Regency England was rife with arcane knowledge and forbidden behavior.

While writing this book, I imagined romantic possibilities for the Gentleman Bandit's daughter, Ruth Fitzhenry. In my next book, this former professional thief will be POSING AS A PRINCESS, a German one at that. Her hero is the Sheriff of Nottingham. As he escorts her to a ceremony with the King, opposing forces try to kidnap or kill her. Helped by strangers, the "odd" couple flees to London. They find no safety there either.

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